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Victims assistance group gets support from county

By **Mitch Fryer**

LEADER TIMES

Friday, March 6, 2009



Facing considerable cuts next year if Congress maintains the planned cap on funding under the Victims of Crime Act, a local victims assistance group has received support from Armstrong County.

On behalf of the Kittanning-based domestic violence shelter HAVIN, the county commissioners on Thursday approved a resolution to be sent to Senate and House leaders recommending that the annual cap on the VOCA crime victims fund be increased to one billion dollars. They asked that the funds be allocated entirely to state victim assistance grants.

"If the cap on the funds isn't taken off, HAVIN stands to lose 18 percent of its funding (beginning with the new fiscal year effective in June)," HAVIN outreach and education coordinator Laurie Johns said. HAVIN will have to cut services, she added.

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Crime Victims Fund are derived from federal criminal offenders via fines, forfeited bail bonds, penalties and assessments collected by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

It goes to state programs to pay for medical care, counseling, lost wages, funerals and other expenses for victims of crimes including domestic violence, child abuse, rape and homicide.

"If we didn't have this money, where would these people turn?" asked county commissioner Patty Kirkpatrick.

Commissioners said that in 2000, Congress began capping annual spending for the fund in order to ensure that a stable level of funding remained available for future use.

The cap has been lower than the amount of deposits into the fund, meaning more than \$1.4 billion has not been allocated, commissioners said.

In 2008 the cap was decreased by \$35 million, despite the surplus.

In addition to the cap reduction, another \$34.2 million was taken out to pay for management and administration costs of the federal Office of Justice programs that administer the fund, the commissioners said.

"This fund was established for crime victims and it's being used for administration of their offices," said Kirkpatrick. "It should be used for the original intent of the law."

Deposits in the fund currently total more than \$1.9 billion, while the cap on funds released from the fund is about \$600 million, according to the commissioners.

More than \$1.4 billion is being held back and the commissioners want to see the cap raised to \$1 billion.

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