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County crime victims' assistance blind-sided by grant money cuts

Posted: Thursday, February 12, 2009 8:48 am

By **GERRY L. DICKERT**
The Bee

When tragedy hits a family, or an individual, help might seem the hardest thing to find.

And that's why those involved with the Hardin County Crime Victims' Assistance Center are so dedicated to being there for those in need.

But that help is being seriously jeopardized thanks to a change in the funding methods set by the Southeast Texas Regional Planning Commission.

According to Cindy Colwell, victim advocate for the Crime Victims' Assistance Center, they have been notified by SETRPC that two grants that have been received over the past several years will no longer be available in their current form.

Colwell explained that before, the Hardin County group was allowed to apply for two grants with each equalling \$80,000 for a total impact of \$160,000 on the group's budget.

SETRPC changes now limit the Hardin County group to just one grant and a new cap of \$50,000 has been established, cutting the possible grant money by two-thirds.

"You can see how critical this is," said Colwell. "We're talking about a huge hit to our budget and I can't really see how it can be fixed."

Colwell explained that the change by the SETRPC in its grant distribution came about because other organizations are seeking a piece of that pie. Typically, six grant applications are received for that money. A committee ranks the grant applications one through six. Usually, Hardin County has received the top two spots in the rankings, ensuring full access to the \$160,000.

Because the Hardin County Crime Victims' Assistance Center is not a non-profit group, other grant opportunities are limited and for that same reason, the group cannot work to raise money for itself.

"We're not a non-profit group so that makes it tough," said Colwell. "Other groups could put on a fundraiser and donate the money to our organization, but by law, we can't do it for ourselves."

The Crime Victims' Assistance Center offers a myriad of services to those who suffer as victims of crime in the county.

Among the most important, Colwell said, is the education of victims of their rights and the legal process they are facing.

"We're able to tell them what to expect, what their rights are as a victim," said Colwell. "Sometimes it's as simple as a phone call to keep a person updated on a trial. Other times, we might go out just after an incident occurs and help a victim. Sometimes it's just holding their hand until family

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members arrive to help.”

There are currently six employees at the Hardin County center with many of those working on-call nights and weekends.

Colwell explained that the cut in grant money could cause that number to fall to two full-time positions ... or even less.

“We serve the people of Hardin County, but the crimes they face don’t only happen here,” she explained. “Sometimes we have people who live here but are dealing with trials in Jasper or Tyler or Jefferson counties.

“If our staff is cut by such a dramatic amount, how can we be there to help the people who really, really need us?”

In the last six months of 2008, the Victims’ Assistance Center served 389 clients. Of those, 92 were child sexual abuse victims, 122 domestic abuse victims and 50 child physical abuse victims.

“Those are the people who are going to suffer,” Colwell said. “The children who count on us, the victims of assault and sexual assault won’t have that hand to hold. We just won’t be able to be everywhere all the time.”

Colwell presented these facts to the Hardin County Commissioners Court on Monday during its regular meeting in hopes that the county might find funding within its own coffers to make up at least part of the grant money being lost.

Commissioners are taking the situation under advisement as the county judge works to figure out a fiscal solution that suits both the needs of the program as well as the needs of the county’s victims.

“There has to be an answer,” said Colwell. “There are too many innocent people who are counting on us to be there. We have to find an answer.”

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