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Delayed funding

Group needs help in aiding crime victims

December 18, 2010 - By WARREN SCOTT, Staff writer

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WELLSBURG - A regional program that assists the victims of various types of crimes could use some help from the community, according to its director.

Erica Gump, who coordinates the Hancock-Brooke-Ohio Victims Assistance Program, said the program has suffered from a delay and decline in funding through the federal Victims of Crime Act that allow it to provide counseling and other services to any victims of crime.

The funding often has fluctuated because it comes from defaulted bonds and confiscated property of federally convicted criminals. No tax dollars go to the program.

Gump said the VOCA funding was cut in recent years to the point the program had to turn to local contributions for counseling services, Gump said.

She said they included \$2,000 from the Hancock County Savings Bank Charitable Foundation that allowed the program to provide about 33 counseling sessions.

Several counselors provide their services to the program at a discounted rate.

She said the VOCA funds have been restored to some extent, with \$100,266 distributed through the West Virginia Division of Criminal Justice Services this year, but are more restricted in their use.

For example, they may not be used for rent, utilities or other office-related expenses.

Fortunately, Gump, who also serves as crime victims advocate for Brooke County; and Beth Vaughan and Jennifer Gruber, who are the advocates for Hancock and Ohio counties, respectively, operate in office space provided at no cost by officials in their respective counties.

The three comprise the program's staff.

When funding was lean and some seeking counseling had to be turned away, other expenses took a back seat, Gump said.

As a result, the water-drenched carpet of the Brooke County office's floor hasn't been replaced since it was removed following the 2004 flood.

Gump said all three offices can benefit from donation of office materials to offset their expenses.

But Gump said her objective is not only to seek assistance from the community but also to make everyone aware the program is available to help them cope with the emotional and physical impact



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of a crime.

"We feel if a person is a victim of a crime, they shouldn't have to pay to get help," she said.

While the program's counseling costs ranged from \$14,348 to \$19,097 from 2003 to 2008, they dipped to \$8,253 in 2009. The number of crime victims served also dropped to 829 from 1,150 to 1,534 in the previous years.

Gump said she's concerned that decline isn't a sign of declining need but of lack of awareness of the program.

The program was established in 1992 through the efforts of Brooke County Prosecutor David B. Cross and Brooke County Chief Probation Officer Jim Lee to serve victims of crimes committed in Brooke County.

But it was expanded to include Hancock and Ohio counties in 1994 and no victim of crime, regardless of where it's committed, is turned away, Gump said.

The crimes may be sexual or other physical assault or abuse of adults or children, accidents linked to driving under the influence, domestic violence, murder, robbery, threatening, stalking or harassment.

Similar victims assistance programs exist in some neighboring areas, and Gump and the other advocates may refer victims to them.

Crime victims also may be referred to organizations that provide related services, such as the Upper Ohio Valley Sexual Assault Help Center.

Gump said crime victims also can receive help in applying to the West Virginia Crime Victims Compensation Fund for compensation for medical and other expenses stemming from a crime committed in West Virginia or to a West Virginia resident.

Crime victims must apply within two years after the crime or no later than two years after their 18th birthday if they were children.

"We have a lot of people who have come forward and said they were molested as a child 10 years ago," Gump explained.

A state official investigates each applicant's eligibility before making a recommendation to a judge who makes the final determination, Gump said.

The fund has awarded up to \$2,000 for relocations in the event a victim believes it's necessary to move for their safety, psychological testing, medical bills stemming from injuries sustained during the crime, mileage for counseling or court appearances and lost wages.

The fund also has provided for counseling for secondary victims, such as children of victims who have been affected by their parents' behavior following a crime, Gump said.

She added the crime doesn't have to be resolved through the court system to be found eligible.

"The sad thing is most people don't know this exists," Gump said of the fund, which has been established through fines and fees paid by defendants in criminal cases.

Anyone seeking assistance from Hancock-Brooke-Ohio Victims Assistance Program should call (304) 737-2515 in Brooke County, (304) 564-4277 in Hancock County or (304) 234-3896 in Ohio County.

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