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State budget could put services for Angelina County crime victims in danger

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By Holley Nees - [bio](#) | [email](#)

LUFKIN, TX (KTRE) – The courtroom is a place to find justice, but in certain cases people like Jessica Hernandez are needed to help the system work.

"I can, you know, just nod my head like you're doing great and she sits up straight and knows she has that support from me," said Hernandez, a bilingual forensic interviewer.

Hernandez was at the Angelina County courthouse as a Harold's House advocate for a 16-year-old girl who claims she was repeatedly raped for three years.

The girl's alleged attacker stands trial for the accusations.

"If we weren't here and weren't able to talk to the kids beforehand, just to be honest and to tell those details, then they wouldn't be able to give the story that the jury should be able to hear," said Hernandez.

However, with state budget cuts, services for victims of violent and sexual assault crimes could shrink fast.

"Knowing that those funding cuts are down the road, it's pretty scary because we offer all of the victim services, like all of our legal advocates are funded with that," said the Executive Director of the Family Crises Center of East Texas Margi Preston.

"There are millions and millions of kids out there that really need organizations like this and that if the budget is cut, then there's not a center where they feel safe at," Hernandez explained.

Without someone like Hernandez to walk the victims through the trial process, prosecutors say many would never have the courage to walk through this courthouse and tell their story.

"It would add a load on us that we're not even qualified," said Angelina County Assistant District Attorney Julie Alston. "We're not

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qualified as counselors...We would have people on the street, potentially that were guilty of harming victims, whether they're children or adults and we would not have the resources to successfully prosecute them in many cases."

Without the proper funding, children will be forced to enter a courtroom made for adults and many victims of all ages will lose the courage to speak out against their abusers.

Preston said state and federal funding has always been something they could depend on. A lack of funding would place a bigger burden on the community to help makes ends meet.

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