NEW VOCA ASSISTANCE RULE MEANS MORE SERVICES, MORE FUNDS FOR VICTIMS

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Courtesy of Courtesy of Joye Frost, Director, Office for Victims of Crime, and Bea Hanson, Ph.D., Principal Deputy Director, Office on Violence Against Women

The Justice Department’s Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) has issued a new rule expanding the ways victim service agencies can use Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) assistance funds. The new VOCA Assistance rule, which became effective on Aug. 8, 2016, clarifies that state VOCA administrators have the freedom and flexibility to use their funds in innovative ways to support victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking. The Office on Violence Against Women joins OVC in reflecting on the many ways the new rule can bring support, healing and concrete service to victims of these crimes.

The major changes that affect victims of violence against women include:

1. **Expanded legal services.** Victims may now receive legal services that extend beyond the immediate aftermath of the crime, including services to protect one’s safety, privacy or other interests in a criminal proceeding directly related to the victimization; motions to vacate or expunge a conviction; and other legal actions that are reasonably necessary as a direct result of the crime. Victims are also now entitled to receive comprehensive legal assistance in custody proceedings, divorce hearings, immigration cases and housing negotiations.

2. **Correctional institutions’ ability to work with rape crisis centers.** Rape crisis centers can now use VOCA assistance funds to serve victims who are incarcerated, an important development in light of the high incidence of sexual assault experienced by justice-involved women. The change also enables corrections agencies working to comply with the Prison Rape Elimination Act to call on rape crisis centers to be an additional source of service and support for victims.

3. **Forensic interviews with vulnerable populations.** When police and prosecutors need to interview vulnerable victims such as children and adults with cognitive or communicative disabilities, they may now use VOCA assistance funds to hire professionals who know best how to get meaningful and accurate responses from these persons without retraumatizing them.

4. **Capacity building.** Under the new rule, states and localities can use VOCA assistance funds to increase their capacity to serve victims by strengthening and enhancing their interagency and multidisciplinary responses. They can use funds to help service providers coordinate with federal agencies to serve victims of federal crimes, or to facilitate their participation on statewide or other task forces. They may also use VOCA assistance funds to pay the salaries and expenses of staff serving on direct service child and adult abuse multidisciplinary response teams, and to support victim satisfaction surveys and needs assessments to improve the delivery of victim services.

5. **Housing services.** Recognizing the critical need for shelter for victims of domestic abuse, the new rule allows service providers to use funding for certain aspects of transitional housing and relocation costs.

We hope that these new avenues of support for victims of crime, coupled with the quadrupling of the amount of VOCA funds Congress has made available over the last two fiscal years, contribute to innovative programming that brings more meaningful and appropriate help to victims. We encourage administrators of state VOCA and Office on Violence Against Women formula grant dollars to work together to maximize the impact of these funds.