What Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) Funds Mean to Minnesotans

VOCA MEANS: HELP FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN WITHOUT A LIFE-LINE

BEFORE VOCA INCREASE: 11,000 Times Advocates Forced to Say “I Can’t Help You” to Victims.

- 50% funding cuts to Minnesotan domestic violence advocacy over the past decade has meant that many battered women and children were trapped in abusive homes. The shelters have been full – nowhere to run. The advocates have been overwhelmed by the needs of so many victims – all alone victims have faced perpetrators in court. Minnesotan victims – in their very own homes – have been beaten, and raped by intimate partners. But, 11,000 times advocates were forced to say “I Can’t Help You.”

AFTER VOCA INCREASE: Real Stories from Domestic Violence Programs Across Minnesota

- The increase in funding has benefited our domestic violence advocacy program and the victims of domestic violence in several ways! First and most importantly, the accessibility to an advocate that can assist victims with services and support has increased from 32 hours a week to 40 hours a week for the 3 full-time advocates. Prior to the increase, 2 of the advocates were only available for 32 hours a week while 1 advocate would cover 4 counties on Fridays as well as handling the crisis lines on the weekend and in the evenings. The main physical office located re-opened so advocates weren’t working only from their cars. We increased office hours from 8-4, Monday thru Thursday, to being open 8-4, Monday thru Friday, as well as having the 24-hour crisis line available to those in need of support. Our program is also able to hire another person who is being trained to do the initial intake with victims so that the other 3 advocates can focus on serving clients within the 4 county area. Our program knows that because of this increase, the chance of a victim “falling through the cracks” will be lowered within the 4 Minnesota counties we serve.

- Our County Crime Victims Crisis Center needs the funding increase to help us serve victims. Our funding had been cut over the years resulting in reduction of staff, we went from having 4 fulltime to staff to 2. Because of the increase in the amount of victims we serve and our increased need to be able to do prevention we are relying on the VOCA monies to increase staffing for victim services. We do not have a local shelter to provide safe housing for victims of domestic violence and are hoping to utilize any additional increase to find an alternative for victims so they don’t have to return to violent relationships. Many of our victims have nowhere else to turn, but us.
• **Funding increases have allowed us to expand our advocacy staff** so that victims do not have to come to the shelter for services. *Transportation is expensive and not always available in our community. Plus, it isn’t safe at times for victims when abusers are looking for them.* We helped over 3,200 victims in our community last year that were not staying at our shelter. Now **with expanded advocacy services, we can meet victims on their time (24/7) at a safe location anywhere.** We now have a staff that can meet victims at the emergency room or at their home after an arrest has been made. We can bring food and clothing items. Many victims are left without diapers or formula for their small children because abusers take the money for themselves. We can get victims a 911 phone immediately so they aren’t left without access to the police. **We are now able to be a true emergency service to those victims who are in real crisis.** We hope that this approach will address the safety issues and curb the need for shelter. **Even with the increase, right now, we are still turning away 20 women per month**

• **VOCA funds** enabled us to **restore staff that had been lost** in previous years due to budget shortfalls despite an increase in the requests for services. Additionally, VOCA funds are allowing us to respond to the requests of professionals and community members. **We have increased our community presentations 50% in recent months and our professional presentations have grown 75%**. This amounts to **over 800 new individuals receiving information and support about the realities of domestic and sexual violence victims** and specific tools to use to provide needed support and referrals. **Additional support is still needed; we run an emergency shelter that is typically at or over capacity – today we have 25 people in a 22 bed shelter.**

• We received this **email from the daughter of a homicide victim** this week. The jury trial concluded with a guilty verdict.

> "Words cannot explain how nice it was to have you and the other advocates be with us during this experience. It was so hard but it was nice every day to have someone waiting for us when we arrived. You went above and beyond what anyone else would have done. Having you and your services around really do make a difference. I will say I will miss all of you, even the wonderful bailiffs who were so nice. If you know anywhere in the cities that is hiring that have programs like yours, I would be honored to work at a place that makes people feel important. Thank you so much for everything."

From an increased funding perspective: we just hired **two additional advocates who were training during the trial.** This allowed us to provide enough staff to assist all of the survivors of this crime and indeed make them feel important – because they are. Without the additional funding, we would have been lucky to have one advocate available for all of the survivors and not likely for every day throughout the entire trial.

• **This money is vitally important to victims. We feel as though we are climbing out of a dark hole that we’ve been pushed into for the last 15 years.** Our organization is **finally able to provide adequate staff to meet the demands of the victims we serve.** We are able to spend more time with victims on several levels. **The VOCA increase means there are enough staff to provide legal advocacy by going to court and accompanying victims to other necessary meetings or making reports.** We are able to provide two support groups each week rather than one as there is enough staff to cover the office.
• Each year we experience a 4% to 5% increase in victims requesting our services. This past year we served 5,600 victims and their children, and answered over 8,000 calls on our 24-hour crisis line. The first contact we have with victims is often immediately following an assault, involving crisis safety planning, and securing emergency needs for the victims and their families. Our program continues those essential advocacy and support services, including serving victims throughout the entire legal process, ongoing safety planning, and providing a range of critical transitional services. Our agency effectively strives to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of the diverse communities who seek our services. The need for our services already outweighs our level of staffing. VOCA funding will enable us to meet the ever increasing demand and provide those services so every victim, regardless of age, language, culture, economics or sexual orientation, can access and benefit from them. Additional VOCA monies translate directly into more victims served, more children protected from violence, more perpetrators prohibited from continued acts of violence, and more lives saved.

• I can tell you that since we received the additional funding we have been able to provide more help to more people than ever before. The need is still greater than what we have and can do - but it is allowing us to better meet the needs of the victims we work with. We have been able to relocate people who have escaped domestic violence situations to other communities and even states - which was beyond our ability prior to these monies coming to us. We have been able to provide more safety and security to the people we work with - replace doors, locks, even have cameras installed. These dollars are truly doing what they were intended to do - help victims of crime. A large role of our government is to provide for public safety. Any funding cuts would have devastating results for Minnesotan victims.

VOCA MEANS: INCREASES FOR MANY FIRST RESPONDERS LIVING IN POVERTY

BEFORE VOCA INCREASE: Domestic Violence Advocates Live in Poverty While Saving Lives
• Just like firefighters and law enforcement, domestic violence advocates are first responders to victims in crisis. They save battered women and children’s lives. Yet many full-time advocates – full-time first responders -- seek public benefits, can't pay rent, live in poverty while saving lives.

AFTER VOCA INCREASE: Real Stories from Domestic Violence Programs Across Minnesota
• There are many benefits to our community regarding the increase in VOCA funds. First, we are able to pay our advocacy staff more so they don’t need to live in poverty in order to do this work. Our old rate of pay was low enough that our advocates did not qualify for low income housing. They were “too poor”. We have a ways to go to get them to a liveable wage but we are moving in that direction. Many of our advocates are also survivors and we know that when women are not able to support themselves and their children, they must become reliant on a partner, even an abusive partner, just to put food on the table, further endangering their own safety and the safety of their children.
• The VOCA funding is going to increase advocate salaries. According to the Minnesota Housing Partnership, “A safe, modest 2-bedroom apartment costs $754 per month in Goodhue County.” With the new VOCA funding, I am finally able to raise all advocate salaries $1.50/hr. For a full-time advocate’s starting salary this is an increase to $13/hr or $27,040/yr. (previously $11.50/hr or $23,920/yr). Unfortunately, by the “affordable housing” standard of no more than 30% of income, for the two-thirds of my advocates who are single-earner families, this increase would still not get them to the affordable housing level since 30% of 27,040 is $8,112 and an apartment at $754/mo would cost $9,048. Fortunately, all but 3 of these single-earners have worked for our program for a while, so the additional $1.50/hr does get them to a rate where $9,048 for rent is “affordable”. While we pay 80% of the employee’s insurance premiums and 60% of the employee’s dependent’s premiums, our insurance policy has a high deductible - $4,500 for a single and $9,000 for a family. I have 7 full-time employees who work a second and sometimes third job in order to meet their financial obligations!

• The new VOCA money helps but really doesn’t go far enough. It was enough to bring our wages out of near poverty and hire 2 new people but it did not come close to increasing employee benefits. This work requires skilled, competent and intelligent advocates.