

Calif. violence shelters closing amid budget cuts

September 8, 2009

By JULIET WILLIAMS (AP) – 19 hours ago

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Six domestic violence shelters in California have been forced to close while dozens more are scaling back services after Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger eliminated all state funding for the program that supports them.

Shelters in the Central Valley town of Madera, the Sierra foothill town of Grass Valley and in Ventura County in Southern California have closed. Others in the San Francisco Bay area, Los Angeles and Bakersfield are on the verge of closing.

Many centers are laying off staff and closing satellite offices that serve remote areas of the state as they cope with the budget cuts. A national domestic violence group describes California's as the deepest cuts to such programs nationwide, even as other states have reduced funding.

In Madera County, officials have turned away six domestic violence victims and eight children since the county's only shelter closed Aug. 7, said Tina Figueroa, the shelter's director. The Martha Diaz Shelter served about 100 victims a year, many of them low-income and with no place else to turn, she said.

"Their only option is the local rescue mission, but they're reluctant to go there because it's a majority of men (who stay there)," Figueroa said. "Also, it's not protected. Anybody could walk in there."

Three families — mothers and their children — who were staying at the secret location also were forced to leave quickly when it was shuttered, she said.

The California Department of Public Health's Domestic Violence Program provided funding to 94 agencies statewide, some of which operate multiple shelters. Most also assist victims with restraining orders, legal aid, child services, money management and other life skills. Nearly all the agencies say they are cutting back on such assistance programs in the wake of the budget cuts.

Schwarzenegger eliminated the program's \$20.4 million budget when he used his line-item authority to veto nearly \$500 million in the revised budget passed by the Legislature. Lawmakers had voted to maintain the program but cut its budget by 20 percent, to \$16.3 million.

"We were appalled by the governor's reckless action, in shock," said Sue Else, president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

She said a handful of other states, including Iowa, Illinois and New Jersey, have reduced funding for domestic violence programs this year, "but nothing like the devastating cuts completely eliminating the domestic violence budget in California."

California's program was created 15 years ago to fund local agencies for abuse victims after the high-profile death of Nicole Brown Simpson, O.J. Simpson's former wife. The agencies also rely on grants from foundations, the federal government and private donors.

The state's 2009-10 budget still includes \$5 million for other programs related to sexual assault and domestic violence, including prevention programs, crisis hotlines, shelters and funding for law enforcement.

"The governor understands how difficult these cuts are and sees the real Californians and the real consequences behind them, but had no other choice because the Legislature failed to pass a budget that closed the entire deficit," said Rachel Cameron, a spokeswoman for Schwarzenegger.

Advocates, however, say the decision was shortsighted.

According to the state attorney general's office, 113 people died in 2008 in cases related to domestic violence, a number that had dropped from a decade-high of 187 deaths in 2003. In 83 percent of the 2008 deaths, the perpetrator was the victim's husband or boyfriend. In 10 percent, the perpetrator was a wife or girlfriend.

"It's the cheapest form of safety the state can have. It's homicide prevention," said Eve Sheedy, director of domestic violence policy at the Los Angeles city attorney's office. "If you take the cost of arresting, trying, incarcerating someone for a serious physical crime or homicide and you compare that to what these shelters were getting, it's an unbelievable cost benefit."

She said domestic violence reports make up the majority of 911 calls, although many victims never reach out for help from police.

The national network, which conducts an annual survey of domestic-violence programs across the country, reported that 3,872 California victims were served during its 24-hour survey period in September 2008, more than half of them for emergency or temporary housing.

Nearly 700 were denied services, often because of short-staffing. About 310 were denied access to temporary shelter because none was available, according to the Washington, D.C.-based group.

A bill by state Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, would restore \$16.3 million for the program by taking money from a California fund designed to compensate injured crime victims or their survivors.

The legislation needs approval from Speaker Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, to move out of a committee and to the Assembly floor. Bass has not taken a position on the bill, said her spokeswoman, Shannon Murphy.

Because it's an urgency bill, it must pass the Senate and Assembly with a two-thirds vote by the end of the regular legislative session on Friday. Otherwise, it will die.

Failure to restore funding would "result in increased health care, law enforcement and other costs to the state," Yee said in a statement. "But more critically, it puts victims of domestic violence and their children in grave danger."

The governor also has not taken a position on the bill, Cameron said.

The group Crime Victims United of California opposes transferring money from the fund. Chairwoman Harriet Salarno said in a letter to Yee that raiding the fund would put a financial strain on the program for "one subset of victims in California."

She said some domestic violence victims might already be entitled to compensation, putting an added financial burden on the fund, which receives money from restitution fines, penalties against people convicted of crimes and traffic offenses, and the federal government.

Tara Shabazz, executive director of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, said domestic violence victims also are crime victims, so it was logical to look to the fund for help in an emergency.

"These budget cuts have made domestic violence victims extremely vulnerable, and we hope that our allies advocating for crime victims will join us in exploring all means of keeping California's shelters open," she said.

Copyright © 2009 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.