Fate of the Federal Fund to Help Crime Victims

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SHEILAH KAST, host:

Top state prosecutors are concerned that the federal fund to help crime victims is in jeopardy. They’re lobbying against a White House proposal to divert the fund’s surplus to the US Treasury’s general fund where it would help offset the budget deficit. The administration says it’s still committed to helping victims of crime, but states worry that the fund for crime victims will be empty in two years. From member station WAMU, Lisa Nurnberger reports.

LISA NURNBERGER reporting:

Congress created the Federal Crime Victims Fund in 1984. President Ronald Reagan had set up a task force that determined that the government wasn’t doing enough to help victims. Maryland Attorney General Joseph Curran remembers it this way.

Mr. JOSEPH CURRAN (Attorney General, Maryland): Many times, the victim was an afterthought. It was state vs. the bad guy. The prosecutors were concerned with, you know, getting the evidence to convict the defendant when, in fact, of course, it really was the victim who the state was speaking for.

NURNBERGER: So Congress created a fund paid for by the criminals themselves in the form of fines and forfeitures. Money goes to states to help families make up for lost wages or pay hospital bills or funeral expenses. More than 4,000 agencies get money for programs such as rape counseling centers and domestic violence shelters. For example, the non-profit Family Crisis Center runs a center in Prince George’s County, Maryland. It’s called The Safehouse. Barbara Harberd(ph) is a counselor.

Ms. BARBARA HARBERD (Counselor, The Safehouse): We have had clients to come in that have been stabbed. I can remember a couple of years ago we had a female that had been stabbed seven times. She came from the hospital. We have had women to come in that have black eyes, bruises. And then we sometimes have women that are emotionally abused.

Unidentified Woman #1: The teacher says to recognize that we are actually been abused; for some of us, though, that’s in denial.
NURNBERGER: On a recent evening, close to two dozen women and their children are staying at The Safehouse. The women sit around a kitchen table for a support group meeting. They’re learning how to recognize and ultimately avoid what’s called the cycle of abuse. It begins with tension, leads to violence and often ends in a honeymoon phase.

Unidentified Woman #2: That’s when the fighting is done, it’s blown up, it’s blown over. He says he’s sorry. Bam, you’re having sex. So it’s – the ‘I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again.’

Unidentified Woman #3: Roses.

Unidentified Woman #2: Yes. Could be candy. Could be anything. But it’s like the honeymoon phase is usually something like that, luring you back.

NURNBERGER: Programs such as this one are in danger, according to the attorneys general in all 50 states. That’s because the president’s budget proposal would move money now designated for the Crime Victims Fund to the general Treasury leaving the $1.2 billion fund empty by 2007. Then it would be replenished slowly as criminal fines are collected. States worry that they’d be expected to carry the load during the interim. They wonder whether they’d have to provide extra money during down times when collections from fines and forfeitures are low. Acting US Assistant Attorney General Tracy Henke says she can’t answer that question.

Ms. TRACY HENKE (Acting US Assistant Attorney General): Well, it would depend on what the president’s budget proposes for the next fiscal year. You know, that will have a bearing on what happens. But understand that the funding provided by the Victims of Crime Act under the Crime Victims Fund supplements state programs. It’s not 100 percent of their funding. It supplements their funding.

NURNBERGER: But in Maryland, the federal fund provides $7 million a year. The state kicks in a fraction of that. The White House insists that it is firmly committed to the fund and will always find the money from somewhere to pay for the programs. Henke calls the Bush plan more honest accounting because essentially it stops Congress from saying it’s setting aside revenue in the Crime Victims Fund while actually following the common practice of spending the money on other things as it flows into the Treasury.

Ms. HENKE: It makes it a more straightforward approach to budgeting, quite honestly, and it in no means is a reflection or should be a concern that individuals have about the commitment that this administration has to crime victims.

NURNBERGER: But what the Bush proposal would do is remove the government’s promise to spend the fund’s surplus at some point on crime victims. Congressman Ted Poe, a Republican from Texas, calls the Bush plan `bureaucratic nonsense.’

Representative TED POE (Republican, Texas): Many of these agencies are working on a shoestring budget anyway. Most of them will close because they need this money to stay in business. Many of these other funds go to children’s assessment centers. These are organizations
that help sexually assaulted children cope with the crime and prepare them for trial. Many of them will close their doors. They have become dependent on these funds.

NURNBERGER: Congressional appropriators will decide whether to accept the White House’s proposal within the next couple of months. For NPR News, I’m Lisa Nurnberger in Washington.

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