



SPEAKING UP:

The FVPF's News and Tips for the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Communities

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SOME STATES AVOID DEEP CUTS, BUT CA LAWMAKERS PUT DOMESTIC, SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMS IN PERIL

When Linda Healy got word last month that the Illinois legislature planned to slash funding for the domestic violence program she oversees, she decided to protest with a powerful but simple symbol: shoes.

The executive director of Mutual Ground, Inc., a non-profit organization in Aurora, Illinois, that provides shelter, counseling and legal services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, Healy and her staff rounded up more than 400 pairs of shoes and placed them along the wrought-iron fence surrounding the organization.

The shoes – pair after pair of pumps, sneakers, slippers and sandals – stood as silent witnesses to the 400-odd women and children who would be turned away next year from the group's emergency shelter, which was forced to close in the wake of anticipated cuts.

The moving display paid off. The news media covered the shuttered shelter in depth and, within two weeks, private donors had stepped forward to provide enough money to reopen it for the rest of the year. (*Visit <http://www.mutualgroundinc.com/news.htm> to see some of the news coverage.*) Soon after, Healy got another bit of good news: the Illinois legislature had vastly scaled back its plan to cut funding for social services.

Mutual Ground will still have to make do with less this year, but it fared better than many other shelters and centers across the state and country.

In California, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger used his veto pen Tuesday to slash funding for the state's domestic violence program and scores of other social services that help women, children and people in poverty.

The move – which came in response to a rejection by state legislators of two large revenue-producing measures – will deprive 94 domestic violence shelters and centers around the state of more than \$20 million in funding, according to the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (CPEDV), a state coalition based in Sacramento.

Lawmakers and advocates are investigating legal options to restore funding. But if the veto holds, shelters and centers that receive state funding will see their budgets shrink by an average of 30 percent, which will force many to scale back or cancel services such as emergency shelter, transitional housing, legal advocacy and counseling, according to CPEDV. Some shelters and centers will be forced to close.

The bottom line is that countless victims of domestic violence and sexual assault will have fewer places to turn in times of danger, said CPEDV Executive Director Tara Shabazz. The loss of services will also cost the state millions of dollars in added health care, law enforcement and other social costs, she said.

“State funding for domestic violence changed the landscape for victims seeking to rebuild their lives,” Shabazz added. “If the Governor’s budget cuts are allowed to stand, victims will not have a place to turn for help, and lives will inevitably be lost.”

Victims face similar – though perhaps not as drastic – situations in other states this year, as cash-strapped legislatures have cut vital services to balance their budgets.

There is no comprehensive tally of state and local governments that have reduced funding for domestic violence and sexual assault programs, and the news media hasn’t put a major focus on how such programs have fared in these tough economic times. But a sampling of news reports documents cuts or proposed cuts to programs in Arizona, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina and elsewhere.

“These cuts can have devastating consequences for domestic violence and sexual assault agencies and the victims they serve,” said Family Violence Prevention Fund President Esta Soler. “Many of these organizations are already operating on shoe-string budgets. Additional cuts make it that much more difficult – and in some cases impossible – for advocates to provide victims of violence with the protections and services they need to be safe, protect their children, and rebuild their lives.”

The cuts come at a time when demand for those services is on the rise.

There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that more people commit violence during tough economic times. But those who are already prone to abuse may use violent tactics more often if they come under financial stress, said Dawn Dalton, Executive Director of the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women’s Network. And victims may stay in abusive relationships for longer if they lose the financial wherewithal to leave.

Dalton makes a comparison to substance abuse. “If you’re abusing substances, additional stressors can exacerbate the type of abuse that’s occurring,” she says.

Rallying Against Cuts

With their programs on the budget chopping blocks, domestic and sexual violence service providers around the country have rallied to stave off proposed cuts.

In Massachusetts, domestic violence and sexual assault programs will see cuts in the coming fiscal year but, as in Illinois, they won’t be as draconian as advocates initially feared.

That's because advocates and activists banded together to educate their representatives about the impact of the proposed cuts, said Pat Kelleher, President and CEO of Brockton Family and Community Resources, Inc., a service and advocacy organization in the southeastern part of the state. "We were enormously successful in what we did. They got the message clearly that domestic violence is on the rise in Massachusetts, and severe cuts were going to endanger the lives of women and children."

Kelleher also praised her state's Department of Children and Families, which she said kept its "steadfast commitment" to preserving direct services for victims. "It was an amazing outcome to an extremely stressful time."

Meanwhile, in West Virginia, domestic violence advocates managed to persuade the state government to increase funding for domestic violence and sexual assault programs – despite pressures on legislators to trim spending due to the depressed economy.

In June, West Virginia's legislature adjourned after approving a one-time supplemental allocation of \$1 million for domestic violence programs, which will help the state maintain core services and provide better compensation and benefits for program staff, said Sue Julian, Team Coordinator at the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

"It will help move us toward these goals," Julian said. "We're not there totally yet, but it's a giant step in the right direction."

Preparing for Another Round of Budget Battles

While domestic violence service providers around the country are still grappling with the effects of this year's budgets, they are wasting no time preparing for what could be an even more difficult year ahead with continued revenue shortfalls projected.

"We're going to be back in the same place in eleven short months," Dalton said. "Yes, we made it through the crisis, but that does not give me any reason to believe we will not be in the same, if not worse, position this time next year."

To prepare for the next round of budget battles, advocates recommend that leaders get an early start in educating state and local politicians about the importance of funding domestic and sexual violence programs.

They urge members of their communities to consider innovative public education efforts like the shoe display at Mutual Ground; grassroots actions like rallies, sit-ins, letter-writing campaigns and "phone-ins;" and continued efforts to monitor the state budget process and reach out to government officials.

Of utmost importance is that organizations work together to formulate a clear strategy and speak in a unified voice, said CPEDV Communications Director Camille Hayes. "When we all work in concert, it's a powerful advocacy voice."