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U.S. holds onto funds for crime victims

Money intended to be used is there, but the federal government is not distributing it, state officials say.

By Mary E. Young
Reading Eagle

Being the victim of a violent crime such as drunken driving or domestic abuse can change a person's life dramatically.

Agencies such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Berks Women in Crisis help victims recover.

But the ability to provide those services for all who need them is in jeopardy because of continual cuts in federal funding under the Victims of Crime Act, said B.J. Horn, director of the Office of Victims' Services for the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

The cuts in allocations to local agencies are unnecessary because the federal fund from which the money is drawn contains \$1.7 billion, state officials said.

If the federal government continues with cuts next year, crime victims will pay the price, Horn said.

"People who have not been victims of crime sometimes don't realize what a life-altering event being a victim of crime is," she said. "It throws your world upside down.

"Sometimes you feel like you're going crazy when actually you're having a normal reaction to a horrific event."

Victims rely on assistance programs to guide them through the court process and connect them to community services they may need, Horn said.

Rebecca Shaver, executive director of the state office of MADD, said the cuts the past few years have reduced funding for the Berks chapter to \$40,000 annually, a reduction of \$10,000 per year.

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Working hours for victim advocates and travel expenses have been cut, she said.

"We're doing more with less," Shaver said. "It reduces services that we're able to provide."

The cuts force the agency to spend more time seeking private donations, she said.

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Berks Women in Crisis Executive Director Mary Kay Bernosky said that over three years her agency's victim assistance funds have been cut to \$360,000 a year, a reduction of \$40,000 a year.

Money received for shelter care from other federal funding pools has remained stagnant, compounding the problem, she said.

The crisis shelter is always filled with 26 women and children, but the funding problem forced the agency to reduce staff hours, Bernosky said.

"It means we don't have the staff to get victims connected with community services," she said. "We've not filled some positions and rearranged or cut hours."

The irony is that the federal government is sitting on a fund created not with tax money, but with fees and fines collected from federal defendants, Horn said.

The commission has been able to make up some of the funding cuts by using victim assistance funds held in reserve, but that won't be an option next year because the funds will be depleted, she said.

Carol L. Laverly, state victim advocate, said victims and programs are suffering because of the federal government's refusal to distribute more of the money from the \$1.7 billion federal fund.

"This is outrageous," Laverly said. "They're just not giving it up."

"Who gets hurt? Programs and victims who can't get services or are on waiting lists."

"This is frustrating because the money is there."

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