

VOCA FUNDING

Victim Advocates Speak Out

In January of 2008, the National Center for Victims of Crime surveyed crime victim advocates across the country about their use of VOCA funds and the effect of recent cuts in that funding. We polled nonprofit organizations serving victims of child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, drunk driving, or survivors of homicide victims, as well as victim assistance units in criminal justice agencies, such as police departments, prosecutor offices, and corrections departments. More than 1,000 responded.

The message was clear: VOCA funds are vital to all forms of crime victim services.

Background

The Victims of Crime Act, passed in 1984, created the Victims of Crime Act Fund, or VOCA Fund, as a protected and dedicated source of funding for crime victim programs. The VOCA Fund does not depend on taxpayer dollars—it is derived from fines and penalties on offenders at the federal level. Each year, the bulk of VOCA dollars distributed goes to states to support two important types of programs: crime victim compensation programs, which pay many of the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by victims as a result of crime, and victim assistance programs, which provide victims with support and guidance in the aftermath of crime. Nearly 4 million victims a year are served by the more than 4,000 local and state victim service agencies funded by VOCA.

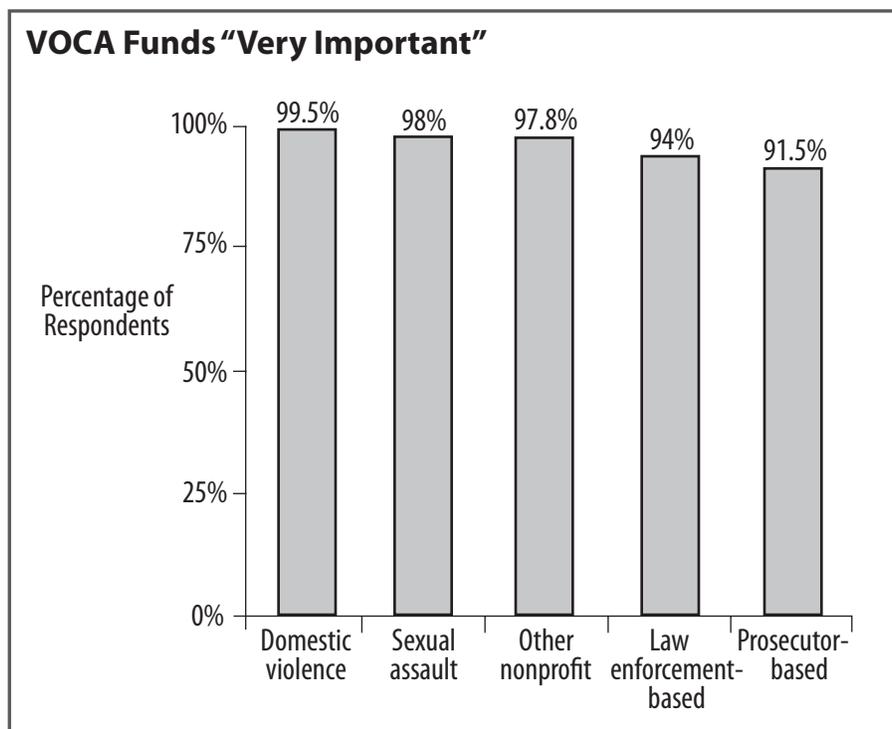
Because the Fund comprises offender penalties and fines, the amount in the Fund fluctuates from year to year. For the last several years, Congress has created a special reserve of VOCA dollars for use in leaner years by placing a cap on the Fund distribution and saving the amount collected over the cap to ensure the stability of the Fund. In recent years, the cap has been set at \$625 million.

In the Fiscal Year 2008 Omnibus Appropriations bill, VOCA funding was cut by \$35 million, despite higher than expected deposits into the Fund the previous year. In addition, the Department of Justice is considering tapping the VOCA allocation to cover shortfalls in management and administration expenses, potentially doubling the loss of funding to local service programs.

The VOCA Fund has proved an effective funding source for more than twenty years. Currently, the VOCA Fund has an estimated balance of \$1.7 billion.

Importance of VOCA Funding

We asked victim service providers to rate the importance of VOCA funding to their programs. Overwhelmingly, respondents told us VOCA funding was “very important.”



From the Field

“We have three over-worked victim advocates; two of them are totally paid for with VOCA Funds.”

–Prosecutor-based service provider (GA)

“VOCA covers almost all of the counseling staff for our women’s shelter and sexual assault program.”

–Nonprofit service provider (VA)

“This is often the only real source of monies that will put a victim advocate on the ground where law enforcement and the victims are.”

–Law enforcement-based service provider (SC)

“VOCA funding is the life-blood of an agency like ours dedicated solely to helping child victims of felony sexual and physical abuse crimes and their non-offending family members.”

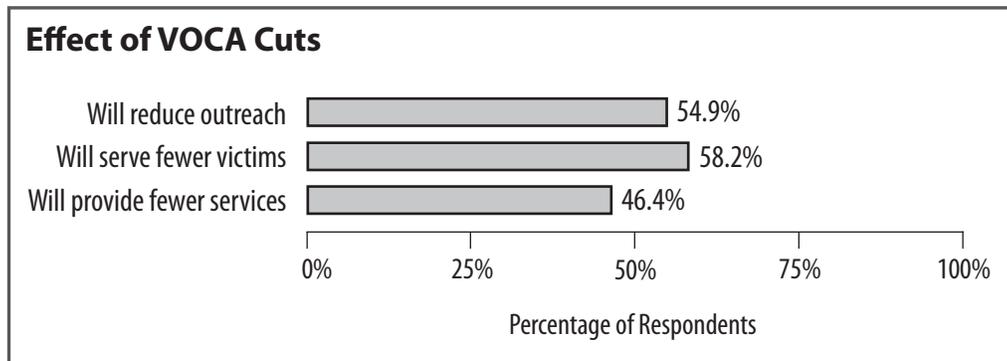
–Nonprofit service provider (AL)

“We are a bare-bones operation.... VOCA funding for staff and services is the only way most of our poor and homeless clients ever get assistance.”

–Nonprofit service provider (TX)

Effect of VOCA Cuts

We also asked victim service providers about the likely effect of the recent VOCA cuts on their programs. The clear message was that the funding cuts would have an immediate and significant impact.



Many agencies indicated they would have to reduce the types of services they offer, no longer having the staff or volunteers to accompany victims to the hospital or court. Others stated that more victims would be wait-listed for counseling or shelter. Many said they would be forced to cut training, including training for volunteers, further reducing their ability to provide direct services to victims.

From the Field

"We will have to reduce our services to victim notification only."

—Prosecutor-based service provider (GA)

"Our crisis counselor and victim advocate may be forced to reduce the court preparation for children and may not be available to accompany them to court—a service which greatly reduces the trauma to children and families and enhances their ability to testify."

—Nonprofit service provider (MI)

"Many victims would be placed on waiting lists and be required to wait up to three months for therapeutic services for sexual abuse."

—Nonprofit service provider (OK)

"We will have to cut one or two advocate positions. As a result, victims will not be provided an advocate in three of our four main court precincts. [It would also affect] the volunteer program, not allowing us the extra money to train [them]."

—Prosecutor-based service provider (AZ)

"We will cancel plans to provide two full-time crisis staff at our hospital emergency department.... The sex crimes unit has asked for our collaboration in contacting victims of cold case files. The funding reduction will affect our ability [to work with them]."

—Law enforcement-based service provider (MI)

Our survey revealed that the VOCA cuts will hit rural areas particularly hard. Agencies spoke of trying to serve up to 10 counties, or requiring victims to travel 3 or 4 hours to receive services. Many respondents said they would have to close satellite offices—even when the space provided was free—because they could no longer pay the transportation expenses of their staff.

Closing a satellite office does not simply mean that victims will have to travel further for services. It also means that victim programs will lose their visibility within the community, leaving more victims isolated.

“Due to our cutbacks we closed our satellite office and have not been able to reach out to rural poor in our community. There is no public transportation within our county, with the exception of a transit system that travels within a ten mile radius of the county seat limited times of the day. There is no taxi service. There are many people unable to reach us, and we do not have the staff or resources to reach them. This is a small rural county; many simply go unserved.”

–Nonprofit service provider (PA)

“Without a regular presence in the frontier rural communities, victims do not know where to turn when they need help. Our partners (law enforcement, prosecutors) forget that we serve their area. This past year we had to cut back two rural advocates in our outlying areas and this is what we are experiencing.”

–Nonprofit service provider (ID)

Need to Release Additional VOCA Funds

There is a great need to release additional VOCA Funds. Eighty percent of respondents said there were victims they were not currently reaching that could be served with additional VOCA funds.

From the Field

“We have child victims who disclose abuse and cannot get an appointment with a therapist for at least a month, sometimes longer. By the time they are seen, they often have suffered additional trauma and stress.”

–Nonprofit service provider (GA)

“We already turn away many people who have emergency needs as a direct result of their victimization because of limited funding.”

–Nonprofit service provider (SC)

“We are approaching the ‘blood from a turnip’ stage. All costs and expenses are going up. We have good community support but due to the state of the economy the community cannot provide more support than it already provides.”

–Nonprofit service provider (ID)

“The situation in economically-devastated Michigan cannot be overemphasized as a contributor to our concern over VOCA funding. For many of us, VOCA keeps core services alive.”

–Nonprofit service provider (MI)

How Service Providers Would Use Additional Funds

If more VOCA moneys were made available, programs would put the funds to immediate use. Many spoke of plans to increase services to elderly victims, teen victims, tribal victims, victims with disabilities, human trafficking, and homicide victims. Others spoke of very specific plans:

“We would have funds to reinstitute our free transportation program for indigent clients; we would expand our education and outreach program; we could implement an enhanced victim advocacy program for victims going to court.”

–Nonprofit service provider (AL)

“Our community serves a large Hispanic group of child victims. If additional funds were available, we would be able to contract with a Spanish-speaking therapist for this population.”

–Nonprofit service provider (GA)

“Right now families have to drive up to 5 hours at times to reach our services. If more funds were available for outreach or satellite services we would easily be able to increase our referrals 50% or more.”

–Nonprofit service provider (ND)

“More VOCA funds for outreach, satellite facilities (for isolated rural areas) and specially trained staff (multi-lingual, therapeutic, legal, etc.) would definitely help reach more victims.”

–Nonprofit service provider (CA)

“We serve older victims of domestic abuse. We need to reach more victims and let them know there is specialized help for them.”

–Nonprofit service provider (MA)

“We would provide Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to children having post traumatic stress symptoms. This is evidenced-based treatment that is proven to actually help children recover from abuse and go on to live productive lives. There is no one in the community that provides this service.”

–Nonprofit service provider (ID)

“A funding increase would mean we could travel to outlying areas, including three Native American reservations, to introduce victim services [for victims of drunk drivers], identify those needing assistance and begin providing support group and court accompaniment to those victims. We would be able to do a better job of victim outreach to ensure that victims in the outlying areas know what their rights are and that there may be compensation funding available.”

–Nonprofit service provider (AZ)

Conclusion

Approximately \$1.7 billion is currently on balance in the VOCA Fund—money that has been collected from federal criminal offenders to meet the needs of crime victims. Congress has an opportunity to make a significant difference in the lives of crime victims nationwide by releasing additional VOCA funds in FY09.



“VOCA funding is vital in providing services to those who, through no fault of their own, have become victims of the most vicious of crimes. If this funding were not available, these victims would go without advocacy, medical, mental health, and/or legal services, which is crucial in a victim’s healing process.”

–Nonprofit service provider (WV)



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