

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CRIME VICTIMS FUND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Provided by the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators (NAVAA)

Pandemic threatens the funding of and access to critical services for victims of crime

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Victims of Crime

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic unintentionally helps create the type of environment that abusers can manipulate. The increased need for services will extend far beyond the current pandemic crisis. Once the nation and individual states begin lifting stay at home orders and survivors feel comfortable accessing services, VOCA funded programs will see a significant increase in outreach.

- Given the directives across the country to stay at home as much as possible, survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault are more likely to be in close quarters with their abusers without immediate access to resources such as advocacy, safety planning, or shelter. This is especially true for victims needing services through tribal victim service programs which face significant unique challenges.
- Outreach to victim service agencies and law enforcement nationwide has evolved since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. For those that are reaching out, more than 5,000 people have called the National Domestic Violence Hotline since mid-March and cited COVID-19 as a trigger.
- Reports of child abuse and sexual assault are plummeting as mandated reporters, including teachers, medical providers, therapists, and clergy are not having in-person interactions with children.
- Social distancing requirements have limited access to funerals and memorials for victims of homicide to mourn the loss of their loved ones. The closure of courthouses around the country are postponing trials and creating stress and uncertainty amongst families around when trials will resume and what access to these proceedings will look like.

Crime Victims Fund as a Necessary Tool to Minimize Impact on Victims

In order to effectively serve victims of crime during and in the aftermath of COVID-19, NAVAA respectfully requests the VOCA statute be amended to:

- Deposit all monetary penalties from deferred and non-prosecution agreements into the Crime Victims Fund
- Allow for additional years of spending or no-cost extensions for VOCA discretionary, assistance and compensation awards

To provide immediate assistance to states supporting victims of crime, emergency funding through general appropriations is also needed:

- \$75M for a Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Victim Assistance Funding Program available to states in need of supplemental funding for emergency assistance during the pandemic.

Importance of Proposed Changes to the Sustainability of Victim Services during COVID-19 Crisis

- VOCA dollars are the primary funding source available for services to all victims of crime. Awards offer greater flexibility in assisting with victims' urgent, immediate needs.
- Increased dollars in the Crime Victims Fund will help Administrators and VOCA programs to effectively provide and manage the surge in victims reporting crimes and accessing services.
- Extended award period allows Administrators to better plan and predict funding awards and long-term services as the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis will affect state budgets and other additional funding sources significantly. For those with remaining funds available, additional time allows for redirection of funds for emergency assistance without threat of compromising traditional services or reversion.
- Emergency funding will provide critical, immediate assistance to states who have already spent down VOCA awards with existing programming and allow for a more robust response to victims seeking services during and after the pandemic subsides.
- The Crime Victims Fund, as is, is projected to reach a ten-year low by the end of 2021 if change is not enacted. Decrease in funding means an increase in unserved victims.