



**Senate Subcommittee on Public Safety, Transportation, and Environment
March 4, 2022
&
House Subcommittee on Public Safety & Administration Regarding
March 7, 2022**

**Rape Crisis & Sexual Assault Funding
Information and Testimony from the Field**

Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth & Victim Services Budget

Sexual Assault Victim Services Providers (Rape Crisis Centers) from across the State provide these reports to the Maryland General Assembly:

From the Dove Center serving Garrett County:

The best description I can give of the nature of service provision as year 3 of the pandemic is “extremely complicated”. Recently I compared Dove Center’s numbers from the past year to the same period the prior year. While the number of individuals served increased 32%, more notably, the number of services provided to those individuals increased 134%. This is an extraordinary increase. This increase can be traced to several issues. The level of dangerousness in each situation has increased, and we are seeing more severity in the level of physical injuries (including strangulation, and use of weapons), more stalking (including cyber stalking and use of tracking devices), more cases coming from elsewhere in the State, to escape human trafficking and gang related abuse, and a continued significant increase in untreated mental health and substance abuse issues, leading to extremely difficult service needs.

Unfortunately, funding has not been available to increase the number of staff who are providing these much more intense and frequent services, leading existing staff to be even more spread thin than usual, and having gone several years without salary increases, thus no reward for their dedication. Another challenge with staffing is presented through the increase in dangerousness of operations. Historically, we have had only single coverage in our shelter facility from 4pm to midnight and midnight to 8 am shifts, as well as on weekends. With the number of clients experiencing active addiction and untreated mental health issues, or escaping from extremely dangerous partners, traffickers or gang members, staff are feeling fearful for their own safety when working alone in the facility.

In the current funding climate, it just isn’t possible to hire additional staff. VOCA is our largest funding source, funding numerous shelter advocates and counselors. If the VOCA gap is not filled, there will be no hope to keep the staff that we currently have, and we certainly will have no chance of hiring to provide double coverage to increase the safety of staff and clients. Services will be drastically reduced. 24/7 access will be difficult, if not impossible to maintain, outreach services, which are crucial in a rural area, will likely be suspended, and school based services will be reduced drastically. If steps aren’t taken to keep VOCA at least level funded, clients will be left dealing with these extremely complicated and dangerous issues alone. There are no words for how important it is for the VOCA gap to be filled. Lives will be lost without it.

From TurnAround, serving Baltimore City and Baltimore County:

TurnAround, Inc. supports survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking by responding to their immediate critical needs as well as offering trauma therapy, case management, and legal guidance. We are committed to raising community awareness and we advocate for survivors through legislative change. Victims of severe violence, such as rape, child sexual abuse, and sex trafficking, depend on our critical services. While we wait for reauthorization of federal VOCA funding, Maryland needs to step into the breach with their own dollars. The State has a significant financial surplus and survivors of these horrific crimes cannot wait. Maryland must not abandon survivors and ignore their urgent needs. We urge them to support our ongoing work and that of our partners across the state.

TurnAround delivered vital services in 2021, responding nimbly and urgently despite the COVID pandemic. In fact, our services have become more urgent than ever.

- TurnAround’s 24/7-Helpline received over 3,000 calls during the past year. That is double our average pre-pandemic call volume. To keep pace with the need, TurnAround has used VOCA funding to expand our capacity by adding additional part-time, weekend, and on-call hotline staff.
- We are consistently spending over \$130,000 annually for bednights and other direct client assistance during the pandemic to help survivors flee abusive situations. In an average year prior to the pandemic, we would spend about half that. The situations that we are seeing now tend to be more violent and higher risk of lethality, requiring longer stays in shelter.
- Safety from abuse was impossible for survivors living with their abuser during the pandemic. Our clinical team provided crisis sessions for over 200 callers in 2021. VOCA funds enabled us to extend our contract with an on-call crisis counselor to be as responsive as possible and mitigate staff burnout.
- The stress and anxiety created by the massive public health and economic emergency threatened survivors’ mental health and stretched their coping skills to capacity. We provided over 500 survivors with trauma therapy in 2021, in person or remotely as public health guidance required.
- TurnAround used social media as a key platform for outreach and awareness, during the pandemic. Through Facebook alone, in the past year we reached nearly 50,000 people.

We know there is a temporary gap in federal VOCA dollars. Maryland must demonstrate its commitment to survivors of rape, child sexual abuse, and sex trafficking by utilizing its large surplus to fund these critical services and sustain the safety net we worked hard to create. In addition, more funding and more flexibility with VOCA dollars and the ability to utilize no cost extensions would enable providers to respond quickly and effectively by minimizing bureaucratic burdens.

From Family Crisis Resource Center, serving Allegany County:

The FAMILY CRISIS RESOURCE CENTER, INC. (FCRC) provides services in Allegany County, Maryland. FCRC’s mission is to assist victims and survivors of intimate partner violence, rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, child abuse, and stalking, as well as to prevent these crimes from occurring in our community. Services include a 24 hour helpline, text/chat support, safe house, crisis intervention, counseling, group counseling, court advocacy, perpetrator intervention, hospital accompaniment and advocacy, supervised visitation and safe exchange, school-based youth prevention workshops, domestic violence follow-ups with law enforcement, and community education. We serve over 2,000 community members each year of all ages,

ethnicities, and genders. Demand for our services is increasing and we are submitting testimony to urge you to offset federal funding cuts with state dollars.

The Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funding supports 24 hour access to crisis intervention, safe house support, and counseling for survivors. For example, a 16 year old who has been in an abusive dating relationship and was beaten by her boyfriend can use the chat crisis support to gain information and link to services for safety. She can meet with one of the counselors for immediate crisis intervention for safety and counseling to address the long-term impact of trauma. Her family may also meet with FCRC advocates to discuss resources for safety and explore methods to support her.

We were shocked to learn that the State of Maryland has not committed to replacing federal VOCA funding cuts. This is a temporary dip in federal VOCA funds that will be replenished as a result of the Federal VOCA Fix bill. If Maryland does not fill in the temporary dip, this is what would happen to survivors in our community:

Staff cuts will have to be made. Without adequate funding, FCRC cannot continue to pay for the current amount of employees.

Survivors, many of whom have just experienced a severe trauma, will be placed on a waitlist rather than immediately accessing counseling.

One of our counselors shared the following:

*"My caseload was already full. In one week alone we received 10 referrals for counseling. Since then it's been steady with an additional 2-4 clients per week requesting counseling. Some of the more dangerous situations include one being **strangled multiple times to the point of near death**, one was **beaten with a baseball bat and strangled**- both clients had to **run for their lives** out of the home and seek help at neighbors or random people on the street, and one client had a **gun pulled on them and pointed at their face.**"* Ten additional referrals is a lot when the agency can only afford one counselor with the current VOCA award.

Hotline callers in need of immediate information and access to services may have to leave a message, rather than reach a live hotline operator. Often, these survivors are calling during the one moment they have privacy from their abuser *and* are feeling brave enough to reach out for help. Access to services is extremely limited when the caller must leave a voicemail.

Current employees are likely to accept employment elsewhere. Staff turnover is high. This is difficult work, made even more so by the increase in severity of violence during this time period. Master's level clinicians are in high demand and can easily make 30% more working in the private sector. It will be very difficult to replace these positions. Survivors will ultimately pay the price by either being placed on a wait list or being assigned to an inexperienced new employee.

We are well aware that there is a temporary gap in federal VOCA dollars. We do not understand why Maryland would choose not to replace those funds. Services for victims of intimate partner violence, rape, child sexual abuse, and sex trafficking are not luxuries. The State has a significant surplus and the ability to reinforce the safety net we have worked so hard to create.

From the Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI), a statewide legal services provider based in Montgomery County:

This case study demonstrates both the need for services and the impact of COVID (identifying details have been changed to protect privacy):

"Anna" is a 16 year old child who lived primarily with her mother. During an overnight visit with her father, Anna fell asleep on the couch and woke up to her father licking her neck and touching her breasts, with his penis exposed. Anna's little sister was asleep in the next room.

Anna immediately disclosed the assault to her mother, who contacted the Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI). A SALI attorney helped Anna and her mother petition for a protective order and report the assault to the police. Unfortunately, COVID made the protective order process a logistical nightmare. On the day of the final protective order hearing, the parties arrived at court, only to find that it had unexpectedly closed for the day. A SALI attorney reached out to the clerk's office and was able to coordinate a new date. However, the clerk's office implemented the new date into the system incorrectly, and Anna's petition was dismissed for failure to appear.

A SALI attorney immediately filed a motion to vacate the dismissal and successfully had the case reset. What should have been a one-week process took more than a month to complete. SALI represent Anna and her mother at the final protective order hearing, which was contested, and was able to obtain protection for Anna and sole custody of Anna for her mother.

The Center for Abused Persons serving Charles County:

The Center for Abused Persons (CAP) serves victims/survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence and others in crisis in Charles County. We offer crisis intervention, ongoing counseling and court advocacy & accompaniment. We also provide 24-hour telephone Crisis Hotline services for anyone in need in Charles County. Staff provide community education and professional training throughout the county. We serve more than 400 survivors each year including both adults and children. Requests for services are continuing to increase. We urge you to offset cuts in federal funding with state dollars to continue to ensure that innumerable victims are able to receive the services they so desperately need.

CAP's Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding supports crisis intervention counseling to help survivors deal with the immediate aftermath of sexual and physical violence as well as forensic nurse examiners, specially trained nurses who perform medical examinations and collect forensic evidence used in the prosecution of these crimes. In addition, our advocates provide court advocacy and accompaniment for medical and legal proceedings to support survivors as they navigate the many things with which they are faced following their victimization. Our therapists provide ongoing counseling and therapy on both a short and long term basis to help survivors of recent or past victimization manage its effects. As an example, one of our recent cases involves a client who came to CAP after being sexually, physically and emotionally abused by her child's father. With our support she has been able to process the experience of being a victim of violence and receive psychoeducation on healthy relationships. Recently she was able to work with her therapist and disclose that she was a victim of childhood sexual abuse, something she had never told anyone else before. With CAP's help, she had a space to process this abuse and begin to heal from the trauma of being a child sexual abuse survivor.

We were stunned to learn that the State of Maryland has not yet committed to replacing federal VOCA funding cuts; this is a temporary cut to federal VOCA funds that will be replenished as a result of the recent Federal VOCA Fix bill. If Maryland does not fill in this gap, this is what would happen to survivors in our community:

Victim Services

If the state does not intervene to fill the gaps in our federal VOCA award, we would have to eliminate staff positions causing victims to have to wait weeks for appointments. Deficits in funding will also impact our Forensic Nurse Examiner program which allows victims to be treated by specially trained, dedicated, caring nurses choosing to work with victims. A minimum of 50 victims will lose out on services.

Impact on Students

Middle and high school students will not have access to presentations about healthy relationships. These seminars are vital not only to educate youth in the community, but often they also serve as a springboard for young people to disclose a history of abuse and allow them to finally get help after years of suffering in silence. At least 2,000 students will not have access to these programs.

Impact on Staff

The pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes in staffing. The majority of our current staff members have been with us less than two years, a significant change from pre-pandemic times. Staff have left for higher salaries, sign-on bonuses and positions that are 100% work from home. It is difficult, near impossible, for small, non-profit organizations to compete with large (for profit) corporations luring our staff away. Without additional funding we will continue to lose qualified staff who are lifelines for those in need in Charles County. The work we do, although rewarding, is quite challenging and it takes a special, dedicated professional to remain in this field. We, and survivors across our State, cannot afford to lose any more team members committed to working in this arena.

We appreciate that there is a temporary gap in federal VOCA dollars. However, it is vital that Maryland chooses to replace those funds until the federal fix kicks in. Services for victims of all forms of sexual violence are essential to the health and well-being of our State. Please use some of the State's significant surplus funds to make certain those who are most vulnerable and have been victimized are able to continue to get the services they need to go on to live happy, successful and productive lives as residents of our State.

From the Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Center at the University of Maryland Capital Region Health

Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funding helps support survivors in Prince George's County.

There have been several examples of transformative change for victims who enter the University of Maryland Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Center (DVSAC). DVSAC is committed to work with victims long after they are seen for medical care and forensic exams. One example is a young adult female survivor of sexual assault, who is a single mother and was unemployed. The traumatized survivor struggled to find work that would sustain her and her 2-year old son. The DVSAC Victim Advocate counseled this survivor and provided information regarding job training programs. The client was accepted into two training programs for certified nursing assistant and medical assistant positions. DVSAC coordinated her receipt of a laptop to conduct her studies, and transportation to the hospital for medical care and counseling. **This**

victim now has hope and a future due to the services made possible by the VOCA funding we received.

Another example is our case management support and advocacy services provided to a male survivor of domestic violence. This victim had been severely injured (stabbed) by his domestic partner. His situation forced him to be without a residence, and live on the floor of an unfurnished boarding room. The VOCA funded advocate facilitated his successful application with the Future Subsidy Housing Program, and coordinated obtaining furniture through one of our community partners. **Through the assistance of our Advocate, this gentleman successfully obtained a full-time and part-time job. These efforts resulted in stabilizing his situation and promoting a safe and healthy environment. VOCA helped support this survivor.**

Finally, our victim advocacy services encompass an extensive network of community partners. DVSAC arranged for over 155 children whose families have been adversely impacted by sexual and domestic violence in 2021. These families received food and toys during the past holiday season, and were entertained by our department and hospital staff. Our services to the community include not only 24-hour crisis intervention, forensic/medical exams, and trauma therapy. We also promote overall well-being and the sustainability of maintaining safety for survivors and their families. **This is why the VOCA funding we currently receive is so crucial. Each of these services, promote a healthier and safer community for Prince George's County and surrounding area.**

From the YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County:

The YWCA of Annapolis & Anne Arundel County has an increased level of need because of Covid based on the need to physically distance. Due to the transitory nature and unpredictable availability of a client, it is very challenging for many clients to schedule an complete the vaccination process. While the YWCA certainly greatly assists with this once joining the residential program, it means that social distancing and lower occupancy in the shelter bedrooms needs to take place to keep people safe/Covid-free. As the organization does not turn anyone away, the YWCA has implemented both hotel partnership and apartment rentals. Because a significant number of clients then reside offsite, this increases the need for additional staffing to provide case management off site, transportation to appointments and a variety of resources not needed when in the on-site program (Uber cards, grab-and-go meals, etc). The cost of Covid is significant.

From a workforce perspective, the YWCA echoes what many others have said – it is a challenging time to ensure excellence in staffing. With so many remote and hybrid work options as well as soaring pay rates, it is clear that crisis intervention programs (especially those with a residential component, which must be onsite) are at a disadvantage. Just two years ago, the YWCA conducted a salary survey and found our company's compensation package was in the top 20% of similar organizations/providers. Today, when reviewing position postings for similar jobs (ie licensed therapists), the options in the private sector provide for up to 100% remote work options, signing bonuses of \$5000 or more, and salaries that are 20% higher than those being offered through nonprofits. Yet, we are not serving the "worried well"; we are serving those in extreme crisis and at significant risk. We therefore need to ensure we have the most highly trained/skilled team members and there is a cost for being able to do that. Without therapists, survivors will be placed on a wait list.

Importance of VOCA funding/filling the gap is pretty simple. For the YWCA, a 60% cut represents approximately \$585,000. To put this in better perspective, that equates to:

- 6 full time client advocates (the people who provide case management, answer the 24-hour hotline, provide hospital accompaniment following a sexual assault, provide intake to the shelter, assist with meals etc for adults and children in the shelter, complete the intake and evidence gathering in peace and protective orders, accompany to court, etc). On average, a single advocate assists 350+ individuals a year. This is over **2000 people per year who would not receive service.**
- 1 full time Attorney (provides representation to survivors in peace and protective orders). A full time attorney represents 150+ survivors in a year. This means **150 individuals are left without support/representation when they go to court**, frequently resulting in the denial of a protective order, dropping charges, and returning (with their children) to an abusive home.
- 2 full time and one half time Licensed Therapist (working directly with adults and children who have experienced sexual assault and/or domestic violence – specialized play and art therapy for kids): Each therapist sees 30 clients per week for an average of 12 sessions. This cut would result in **300 survivors having no access to therapy.**
- Office essentials: **IT support, phone service, hardware/software, basic office supplies.** The basics of what is needed to provide the services are included in these grants. Without funding, even the most basic of resources are left unfunded.

This funding literally supports over **2500 people a year** – and that is just **one** county. Without it, it is not a matter of “making do with less” – there are simply not staff to provide the service and the needs of victims/survivors will go unmet.

From the Southern Maryland Center for Family Advocacy:

After an initial decrease in the number of individuals we were being able to assist in the early days of the pandemic, the Center for Family Advocacy has seen a steady increase in both case numbers and the complexity of the situations we are seeing. This makes sense: even stable families were weakened by the fallout from the pandemic, but for families already unstable due to family violence, the pandemic introduced powerful additional challenges: unexpected deaths and short- and long-term illnesses; unemployment and financial instability; the risk of eviction after suspended or delayed rent payments; behavioral and educational issues with children after nearly two years of remote learning; and more.

In the face of these complexities, many programs—including ours—were able to secure additional short-term Stimulus, Recovery Act and similar funding to help meet these challenges. These funds are largely in the past, now, but the challenges are not. Our case numbers continue to rise, and the problems we are seeing in cases are, if anything, even more multi-layered and complicated to solve, in part because they have been ongoing over two full years.

Our clients have repeatedly found that the pandemic has taken from them what few resources they might have had, prior to its onset. In the early months, victims were forced to remain with their abusers, often for 24 hours a day, as workplaces were shuttered. When the world began to cautiously reopen, victims discovered that social welfare networks were suddenly inaccessible, completely overwhelmed by the

increased level of need, and still working remotely, making it impossible, in many cases, for victims to even reach a representative to attempt to secure benefits such as food or housing assistance. Fleeing to a shelter, always a potential matter of life or death, became even more so because of the threat posed by Covid. As one of our clients, a woman who is immunocompromised, said to us, despairingly, “Should I stay at home and let him kill me, or should I go to a shelter and let Covid kill me?”

Our staff members, like many Americans, are exhausted in the face of these Sophie’s Choices, for both their clients and themselves. They have sustained a higher-than-ever level of engagement with and response to the victims we serve, even in the face of the threat of Covid. This commitment is in their DNA: the more complex the challenges, the more our advocates, attorneys, crisis workers and case managers expend in time, energy and commitment. This is true of administrators, as well; we have worked relentlessly for two years to keep our programs open and safe, and to balance the multiple demands of increased cases, decreased funding, and stressed, often-overwhelmed workers.

To know that we are facing a severe funding crisis from the VOCA funding gap, just as the economy begins to emerge from this crisis, just as we are beginning to be able to offer more options to victims of family violence, who have suffered far more many during the pandemic, is devastating.

Make no mistake: we are not programs complaining because we won’t have a little extra to fund a staff training, because we won’t be able to pay for some vague program need. These cuts mean eliminating fully half of our 16 positions, gutting the program and, most critically, gutting the services to victims. And if the cost isn’t clear, here is what that means: over 2000 residents of Calvert, Charles and St. Mary’s Counties being brutalized by violent partners will not receive essential services: legal representation, emergency shelter, housing assistance, safety planning and more. Without the Governor approving a budget that fills this temporary gap, the State of Maryland—and the Governor, specifically—will have left them on their own. Violence against women and other victims will rest in the Governor’s hands and remain the most lasting part of his legacy.

Maryland’s Comprehensive Rape Crisis Centers provide services to every jurisdiction in the State. They are vital to the recovery of survivors and to the prevention of sexual violence in the future. These stories are only a sample of the challenges faced by survivors and the programs they serve as Maryland navigates the pandemic. MCASA urges the Subcommittees to take steps to ensure that services continue and remain stable during the crisis facing our State.

