



Access to Justice and Budgetary Needs

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Thank you for your work on access to justice and the resources needed to ensure that our justice system is meeting the needs of Vermonters. We appreciate the Committee's attention and focus on the court backlog and what investments are needed to ensure that our justice system is functioning, and Vermonters and our communities are able to access the justice they need in relative proximity to the harm they experience. This work is incredibly important to victims and communities impacted by crime.

The Vermont Network would like to highlight the needed investments in *community-based* victim advocates and legal services as part of this essential fabric of legal responses in our communities. As you have heard, our justice system is comprised of interconnected stakeholders and institutions which each serve a distinct role in this system.

Role of Community Based Victim Advocates

The 15 Member Organizations of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence operate in every community in Vermont. Community-based victim advocates provide both crisis and ongoing support to victims of domestic and sexual violence. This includes victims who have both accessed the justice system to address the harm they have experienced and those who have not. Advocates also assist survivors in considering their options for accessing the justice system. Last year, 98% of the survivors served by community-based advocates of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence reported that, as a result of their interaction with an advocate, they were more aware of their rights and options.

Community-based victim advocates serve many or most of the survivors who are interacting with the court system – in addition to many who are not. Community based advocates work directly with survivors who are navigating the criminal court process, abuse prevention and sexual assault/stalking orders as well as those involved in divorce and parentage cases. This includes assistance to victims throughout their involvement in the process, including assistance interfacing with law enforcement, prosecutors' offices and more. Community-based victims advocates play an essential role in assisting victims and survivors who are navigating the court backlog and in ensuring that victims' rights are upheld throughout the process.

Last year, community based domestic violence victims answered **23,300 hotline/chatline calls** and provided in-person advocacy to **8,494** survivors. These figures represent only the survivors who reached out last year – but advocates have relationships with survivors that last many years.



Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund

Despite the important work of community-based domestic and sexual violence advocates, there have been no ongoing state investments in community-based domestic violence services in over 10 years. In fact, over the past several years the General Assembly has needed to fill considerable holes in the special fund that funds these services. According to the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services, in this current fiscal year there is a significant deficit in the revenues in the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund. The total expenditures of the fund are \$801,473. The Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services currently estimates that there will be a **\$90,000 deficit** in the fund. This fund has been level funded for 10 years. **This may result in cuts to services.** In addition, we are requesting a **3% base increase** to the fund.

FY 2025 Budget Request - \$114,044 in General Funds

- \$90,000 – Deficit in the DV/SV Fund
- \$24,044. A 3% increase to the fund would result in a \$24,044 increase.

Role of Legal Representation for Victims

We also want to highlight the important role for legal representation for victims and the critical role of these services in addressing access to justice. While there are dedicated resources and institutions representing the interests of the State and defendants in criminal matters, victims do not have any right to representation within the legal system.

The Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services funds a small number of legal services providers to provide legal representation for victims. The Legal Partnership for Crime Victims is comprised of Legal Services Vermont, Vermont Legal Aid, the Vermont Bar Association, the Vermont Network, the South Royalton Clinic at Vermont Law School, and Have Justice Will Travel. The cases that come before them are mostly related to interpersonal violence. While this partnership is designed to help all crime types, (37%) of the crimes addressed by this partnership are domestic and or family violence. In addition, 14% of cases are representing victims in stalking cases, and 10% for child abuse and adult sexual assault. Of the victims served by these services 87% are female. The demand for their services is growing yearly, and they have reached capacity.

Having access to legal services for victims is an important prevention measure and reduces the future likelihood of continued involvement with the legal system. In other words, when victims receive representation, it prevents future cases from coming into the court system. The National Network to End Domestic Violence (2017) found in their survey of 1,762 shelters that DV survivors without legal representation are more likely to be later victimized than those with access to legal representation.

Currently, these legal services are funded by Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds. Due to declines on the federal level, the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services is anticipating a 40% cut to funding in FY26. The Vermont Network and the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services will be making a request of the legislature in the next biennium to preserve these critical services.