



Memorandum Re: S.17 - An Act Relating to Sheriff Reforms

Sarah Robinson, Deputy Director

February 10th, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on S.17. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence represents 15 independent Member Organizations who provide direct services to victims of domestic and sexual violence. In 2022, these organizations provided in-person support to 8,241 people and answered over 19,000 hotline calls from Vermonters seeking information and advocacy related to violence.

Issue of Concern

The Vermont Network has been watching the discussions related to Sheriff reforms in Vermont, and we wanted to bring a small but critically important issue to your attention. Sheriffs often accompany survivors to their homes so they may safely collect their possessions after a Relief from Abuse (RFA) Order has been issued. Many Sheriffs charge survivors fees for this assistance. Our Member Organizations often use their own funds, when available, to cover these expenses. While these fees vary from department to department, they range from \$75 to \$150 per hour and many include a minimum number of hours. In addition, some Sheriffs' Departments also include mileage charges. Combined, non-profit organizations and survivors themselves are paying thousands of dollars per year to access protection when removing belongings in the wake of violence.

Our concerns related to this practice are:

- **Charging survivors to access safety.** For survivors who need to remove items pursuant to a relief from abuse order, standby assistance from a law enforcement agency should be provided free of charge. It is noteworthy that the State of Vermont has made a policy decision to cover the cost of domestic violence offender accountability programs with no charge to participants. While we fully support this policy decision, survivors are simultaneously charged in order to safely remove belongings from abusive homes.
- **Geographic Inequity.** There is wide variation and lack of consistency in the fees charged, and whether they are charged, across counties in Vermont. Fees range from \$0 to hundreds of dollars, resulting in significant geographic injustice for survivors based on their county of residence.

Proposed Amendment



The Network is requesting the language below or a similar amendment in S.17 to ensure that Sheriffs provide this assistance without any charging a fee to the survivor or any of their representatives.

24 V.S.A. § 293 Duties

A sheriff so commissioned and sworn shall:

- (a) serve and execute lawful writs, warrants, and processes directed to him or her, according to the precept thereof, and do all other things pertaining to the office of sheriff.
- (b) Assist in the retrieval of personal belongings from the residence of a person who has a Relief from Abuse Order without charging any fee to the person or any representative of the person.