



Testimony on S.131
An act related to state's attorneys and sheriffs
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this legislation.

The Center's Position on S.131

The Center supports the right of victim advocates to organize with fellow Department of State's Attorneys employees to secure better wages, benefits, and working conditions. To the extent this effort results in budget increases to the Victim Assistance Program, new General Fund dollars will need to be appropriated for victim advocate salaries and benefits to avoid supplanting with federal grant funds and/or cuts to other victim service grants and programs across the state.

The Center's Interest in S.131

Since 1991, the Center has stood with victim advocates to expand the Vermont Victim Assistance Program and to ensure that they receive the compensation, benefits, and working conditions they deserve.

- **The Center supports victim advocates in their work through training, technical assistance, and statewide coordination.**
The Center administers the Vermont Victim Assistance Program, currently staffed by a part-time Program Coordinator and comprised of 27 victim advocates located in state's attorneys' offices across the state.
- **The Center provides state and federal grants to the Department of States Attorneys to pay victim advocate salaries and benefits.**
The Center administers the Vermont Victims Compensation Fund and federal formula grants allocated to Vermont for statewide victim services.
- **The Center is responsible to Vermont crime victims and victim service-providers to ensure the on-going health of the Vermont Victims**

Compensation Special Fund and the Restitution Special Fund and to appropriately administer federal formula grant funds statewide.

- The Victims Compensation Special Fund primarily supports the Victims Compensation Program, which ensures that crime victims do not have to bear the burden of medical bills, crime scene clean-up, or other uninsured expenses directly resulting from their victimization. Traffic ticket fines and fees are the primary source of revenue into this fund.
- Federal formula grants, including the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant, pass through the Center to over 50 direct victim service providers statewide. (See VOCA sub-grantee list attached.)
- The Center itself does not receive a General Fund appropriation to support its operations and instead relies on special funds and federal grant administration fees.

Background: Current Funding Challenges

At the inception of the Victim Assistance Program, victim advocates were funded with General Fund dollars. Over the past two decades, however, the Legislature has chosen to steadily decrease the General Fund appropriation for the Program while increasing the Program's reliance on special funds. In order to supply the necessary revenue into the special funds, the Legislature also steadily increased the amount of traffic ticket fines and court fees.

For a host of reasons known and unknown to the Center, revenues to special funds managed by the Center have declined over the past few years. This trend coincides with a trend of advocate salaries and benefits out-pacing existing revenues. In FY15, the Legislature appropriated a one-time \$500k allocation from the General Fund to bail out the Program. (See Chart attached.)

The Center has also used federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant funds in recent years to ensure that the Victim Assistance Program continues without any staffing cuts, although doing so reduces the funding available for all of the other direct victim service providers statewide who rely on federal funds for their essential work. In FY17, **one-quarter** of the state's VOCA allocation was used to support the Victim Assistance Program, which represents a huge proportion relative to other states and the other dire victim service needs across Vermont.

**SAO
Victim Advocates**

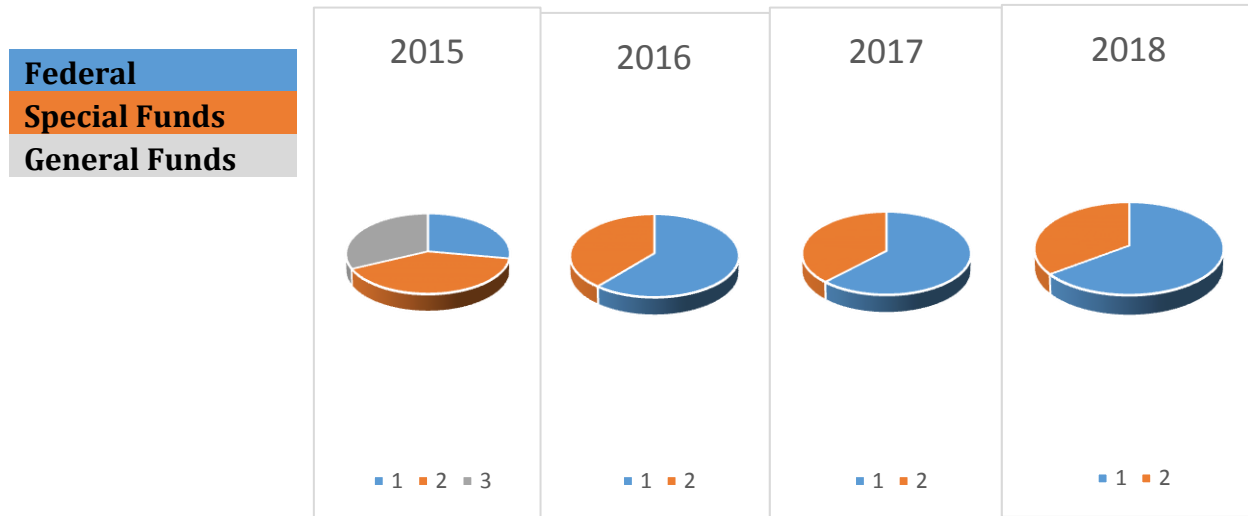
2015

2016

2017

2018

Federal	\$492,852	\$1,125,340	\$1,171,701	\$1,312,523
Special Funds	\$712,537	\$717,922	\$712,537	\$712,537
General Funds	\$567,250			
Total	\$1,772,639	\$1,843,262	\$1,884,238	\$2,025,060



In 2013, the Legislature convened a study committee to consider the future of funding for VCCVS and the programs it supports – that report recommended that state employee Pay Act appropriations be used to cover any future increases in victim advocate salaries and benefits.

Conclusion

Acknowledging that these funding challenges existed, the Center reached out to VSEA on numerous occasions to work together on this legislation. The Center remains committed to engaging in those conversations today.