



Fiscal Year 2021 Budget
Senate Appropriations, March 19th, 2020
Jessica Barquist, Policy & Organizing Director

The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is Vermont's leading voice on domestic and sexual violence in our state. We represent 15 Member Organizations throughout the state which provide advocacy and support to victims of domestic and sexual violence. Together, these organizations serve every town in Vermont. In 2019 member programs helped 8,760 individuals and reached 12,000 youth through prevention programming in schools and other settings throughout our state.

The Vermont Network is requesting a \$500,000 increase in state funding to be distributed between the Vermont Network and our 15 member programs. Currently, 14 of the member programs receive an allocation that flows through the Center for Crime Victims Services, but **this appropriation has not seen an increase since 2008**. The Vermont Network and the Pride Center of Vermont do not receive any of these funds.

In the past 12 years, the landscape and scope of our work has changed dramatically. The opiate crisis and ongoing issues with affordable housing have made it increasingly difficult for survivors to find and maintain safety and stability. Emergency shelter stays for the past 3 years have increased from a few weeks to an average length of stay of 52 days. As Vermont continues to innovate and invest in criminal justice reform efforts, those efforts must also include investments in meeting the needs of victims and survivors.

Our programs are both resourceful and tenacious and have managed to maintain quality care for survivors in need across the state, but they are increasingly doing more with fewer resources. Many programs have cut staff and are relying more and more on volunteers to provide critical services, such as our 24-hour hotlines. When asked about the landscape, one Executive Director stated, "I know that we should be doing outreach in our community, but I can't see how, when we cannot adequately provide services for all the people who do find out about us and walk in our door."

We know that advocacy services work. Survivors who work with advocates have lower risks of re-abuse and are more connected to community supports. In 2019, 98% of the survivors served by member organizations of the Vermont Network reported that, as a result of the advocacy they received, they knew more about their rights and options. Studies indicate that when advocates are present in the legal and medical proceedings following assault, victims fare better in both the short- and long-term, experiencing less psychological distress, physical health struggles, sexual risk-taking behaviors, self-blame, guilt and depression. Investment in advocacy services is an investment in the safety and well-being of Vermonters.



Although the needs of our programs are on-going and sustainable funding is preferred, we would still greatly benefit from an infusion of one-time funds. Here are just a few of the many, many ways in which the Vermont Network and the 15 member programs identified that they could utilize one-time funds to support our communities and survivors of domestic and sexual violence:

- Expand emergency housing shelter
- Implement a county-wide Lethality Assessment Protocol in Addison County
- Transitional housing support funds for survivors
- Upgrade our systems to increase the ability to keep client data secure
- Expand shelter capacity to help people exit sex trafficking
- Complete energy efficiency upgrades to our buildings to increase long-term savings
- Increase our volunteer recruitment, training and support
- Repair/replace outdated and partially functional security system
- Build capacity to effectively find, apply, and receive grants through Grant Writing Consultation
- Conduct a Statewide Community Needs Assessment to better understand LGBTQ+ survivors' needs statewide

The current unprecedented public health crisis has made increased state investment in domestic and sexual violence services even more critical. Survivors of domestic and sexual violence face unique challenges in this environment. For those experiencing violence at home, social distancing magnifies the isolation and risk survivors experience. For those survivors living in shelters, communal living - especially in a confidential setting - poses unique public health challenges as it relates to isolation or quarantines. In the coming weeks, we anticipate an increase in survivors looking for support in finding shelter because they will be unable to stay with friends and family members who might have otherwise been able to provide housing. Our shelters currently operate at capacity almost all of the time and a closure or quarantine of any shelter space would result in an added strain on survivors sheltered through motel/hotel vouchers.

Right now our Member Organizations are working to build systems to provide advocacy remotely to survivors who may be extremely vulnerable in the coming months. We are also working to support survivors who will continue to need access to timely sexual assault exams in emergency departments across the state, even as the virus may tax our health care systems. We are so appreciative of the speedy work that the Legislature has done in preparing emergency funds for shelter operation and survivors basic needs. It is absolutely essential that these emergency funds are supported with a strong investment in the core services provided by our programs.



Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony and for your thoughtful consideration. Please be in touch if you have any questions or need additional information.

Jessica Barquist
Policy and Organizing Director
Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
jessica@vtnetwork.org
Cell: 201-213-0302

Sources:

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