



**Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
FY 2022 Budget Adjustment Request – Legal Services for Victims**

The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence represents 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 2021, member organizations supported approximately 8,000 individuals and answered over 21,000 hotline calls – a 15% increase over the previous year. Across the state, advocates and survivors report increased severity and complexity of the violence being experienced by survivors of domestic and sexual violence because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Vermont Network has responded to the unprecedented needs of survivors during the past year.

The Vermont Network is seeking a **one-time appropriation of \$112,000 in the FY 22 BAA to keep the only statewide legal clinic for victims of domestic and sexual violence operational in 2022.** The Justice for Victims Clinic is operated by the Vermont Network and provides direct, legal representation to victims of domestic and sexual violence in court proceedings. The Clinic also contracts with private attorneys who agree to be paid a low-bono rate by the Vermont Network to provide free representation to victims in their communities. This allows victims in the most rural regions of Vermont to access representation. In 2021, the Justice for Victims clinic provided legal representation to 427 victims of domestic and sexual violence. Importantly, the Justice for Victims clinic is the only pro-bono legal services provider in Vermont offering representation to child victims of sexual abuse and representation to domestic violence victims in child custody proceedings.

Due to a cut in federal funding, the clinic faces a one-time shortfall which extends from January 1, 2022 – September 30, 2022. The Justice for Victims Clinic hopes to access a federal grant in October of 2022 to support continued operations of the clinic. Without bridge funding, the clinic will need to be closed. This BAA request was included in the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services budget adjustment request (attached).

The timing of this funding shortfall could not come at a worse time for domestic and sexual violence victims. Vermont courts are finally scheduling many proceedings which have experienced month or years-long delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the severity of abuse - including child sexual abuse - has increased during the pandemic, leading to increased demand for legal services.

We thank the committee for its consideration.



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To: Adam Greshin, Commissioner, Department of Finance and Management
From: Jennifer Poehlmann, J.D.
Executive Director, Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services
Date: November 30, 2021
RE: Budget Adjustment Proposal for FY22

Vermont's "Stay Safe, Stay Home" orders, and the stressors of the pandemic have resulted in increases in the number and severity of cases of domestic violence, child abuse and other violent crimes. Crime victims who have experienced unimaginable traumatic events are supported by essential services that are funded in part by Vermont's Special Funds. While we cannot predict the future, we would be remiss in underestimating the long-term impact that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on those navigating a course to safety from the isolation of their homes. Because of this reality, the many services that are supported by the Center for Crime Victim Services (CCVS) are more important now than ever.

At the same time, revenues from traffic tickets and criminal convictions that support the Compensation Special Fund are experiencing an unprecedented decrease. These fines and fees pay for victim's crime related losses; funeral expenses, counseling, medical expenses, and relocations are just some of the ways these funds help crime victims. The amount that the state contributes to the Victims Compensation Program each year is then matched in the following year by the federal government at an amount equal to 75% of the state's contribution. Thus, future revenues could be at jeopardy as well. Revenues have continued to decline into State Fiscal Year 2022.

Compensation Special Fund (13 VSA §5359): These funds support victim compensation claims, Supervised Visitation Programs (SVP), a SVP coordinator position, and the Domestic Violence (DV) Council Coordinator position. The Compensation fund also supports the Vermont's Victim Assistance Program (VAP), which provides support for the 27 advocates who work within Vermont's 14 State's Attorneys offices. The SFY22 budget includes a one-time GF appropriation of \$712,537 to support the VAP.

The current SFY22 Compensation Fund budget was already decreased based on declining trends in SFY's 18, 19, 20 and 21. However, the current revenues for the first five months of SFY 22 are 47% below those of SFY21 for the same period, a record decline. Based on the current projections. CCVS is requesting a SFY22 budget adjustment of **\$1.3 million** to meet the current grant funded programs and services. These funds are also the primary funds used to support the



operational and personnel expenses for CCVS. It should be noted that in the past 3 years, CCVS has reduced staff by 9 FTE positions (from 25 FTE to 16FTE).

Domestic and Sexual Violence Fund (13 VSA §5360): These funds support the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence programs, and the DV/SV trainer and DV Council Coordinator positions. The current SFY22 revenue projections for the first 5 months show that the DV/SV fund will not meet the SFY22 budget allocation to support the grants that have been issued to the Vermont Network programs. CCVS received a one-time GF appropriation of \$345K in SFY22 to support these programs. CCVS is now requesting a budget adjustment of an additional **\$250K** to meet the current grant obligations. All the DV/SV funds are used to support the Vermont Network programs and services and no funds are used to support CCVS operations.

Legal Services for Victims

The Vermont Network Legal Clinic is one of the only providers of pro-bono divorce and custody cases for victims and serves a critical role in representing domestic and sexual violence survivors in our state in various civil matters related to or impacted by their victimization. The Vermont Network has had the Legal Assistance for Victims grant through the Office on Violence Against Women for the past three years. Unfortunately, this discretionary grant was recently discontinued, and the program needs bridge funding to continue operating for the next 9 months without disruption.

CCVS is requesting a budget adjustment of **\$112,000** to enable the Clinic to continue to provide legal services not otherwise available to or affordable for victims of domestic and sexual violence or child abuse. The Clinic has served 841 survivors of sexual and domestic violence and stalking. 258 of these survivors sought legal services related to sexual violence, 547 related to domestic or dating violence, and 48 were victims of stalking. Of the clients served, 53 were homeless when they reached out to the Clinic, and 44 survivors identified as LGBTQ.

In conclusion, while the years long downward trend in special fund revenues has long been identified by the Vermont Legislature as a priority area needing attention, the pandemic has created a crisis in funding for essential services to support Vermonters who have experienced significant and even life-altering harm. The closure of the courts due to the pandemic and a decline in the issuance of traffic tickets has resulted in decreases in revenues that can no longer be otherwise accounted for. Programs and providers are asked to do more with less, as we have seen an upward trend in the demand for services, along with the complexity of the presenting problems. Without the provision of general funds to offset these losses, the impact on victim services, including those impacting victims of child abuse and domestic and sexual violence, will be catastrophic.

We thank you for willingness to consider our total budget adjustment request of **\$1,662,000**. We are available at any point to provide additional information. We recognize and appreciate the challenging work you do, especially during these difficult times.