



**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.