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Advocates fear proposed budget cuts might endanger domestic-violence victims

by ANNE LOOK
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Proposed cuts in federal funding to domestic-violence services could lead to more cases such as those of Cindy Bischof and Mercedes McCauley, two Chicago-area women murdered by their ex-boyfriends in the past month, Illinois legal advocates fear.

Although both women had obtained court orders of protection and did all the legal system required, the law didn't protect them from being killed

The proposed 2009 federal budget would cut key grants for programs serving domestic-violence victims by 20 percent. The reduction will be closer to 25 percent in Illinois, those who provide services estimate.

In conjunction with helping victims get orders of protection, social-services workers who specialize in domestic-violence law – they are called legal advocates – develop safety plans with victims, perform danger assessments to identify high-risk behavior on the part of abusers and connect victims with counseling services.

"For the vast majority of people, they [orders of protection] do work and they can be a deterrent," said Jennifer Greene, the Court Advocacy Program Director for Family Rescue. "But it's just one tool in the toolbox that you can use to be safe."

Bischof's and McCauley's situations were different, but their murders have been used to show that an order of protection is not a guarantee of safety.

Legal advocates in the Chicago area brace for a reduction in their resources.

"We're very frightened," said Therasa Zito, Program Manager for Hull House's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program. "We can't give everyone an advocate already and we may have to cut more."

Hull House legal advocates are currently only able to serve about 1000 to 1500 clients per year in Cook County, a fraction of the need, Zito said.

Illinois courts heard nearly 50,000 cases for orders of protection in 2006, and the Illinois State Police estimate there are 30,000 domestic-violence orders of protection in effect on any given day for women and girls in the state.

Organizations such as Family Rescue and Hull House offer free, comprehensive legal advocacy for Cook County domestic-violence victims.

"There is a huge need," said Grace Lim, Director of the free Micah Legal Aid Clinic in Logan Square. "Any funding cuts can have a devastating impact for clients and on the services we can provide."

The proposed federal funding cut would directly affect these groups by reducing money awarded to states through the Victims of Crime Act for recovery services such as legal and medical advocacy.

"It absolutely affects services and the amount of advocates," said Heather Dorsey, Senior State Council Coordinator for the Illinois Family Violence Coordinating Councils.

Dorsey said she is worried about the message that cuts would send to domestic-violence victims and service providers and the effect they would have on advocates' availabilities and salaries.

Hull House stands to lose one to four court advocates as four of their five grants are connected to federal funds, Zito said.

The majority of women seeking orders of protection in civil court represent themselves. As an attorney at the Metropolitan Family Services Legal Aid Bureau, Lim has noted the positive difference working with an advocate or a domestic violence lawyer can make in keeping victims safe.

To avoid cuts to its nine-person legal advocacy staff, Family Rescue will move funds from other services and seek private funding, Greene said.

"Because of critical need for legal advocacy services, the agency has decided to absorb the funding cuts to meet the need," Greene said.

Although Illinois has one of the most comprehensive domestic-violence laws in the country, navigating the legal system proves difficult for victims traumatized by abuse, Greene said.

The Justice Department estimates that about one third of female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner.

"Advocacy services are crucial," Greene said. "Having an advocate makes a difference to victims of domestic violence."

Illinois Domestic Violence Helpline: 877-863-6338

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