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HUNDREDS RALLY IN SEATTLE TO PROTECT CRIME VICTIM SERVICES

Advocates call on state for stabilization funding for victim services statewide

SEATTLE, Dec. 7, 2024 – A crowd of hundreds marched at Seattle Center today to draw attention to a severe funding crisis ahead that could affect the state's ability to respond to 52,000 crime victims each year.

Organizers from coalitions representing 140 domestic violence, sexual assault, children's advocacy centers and civil legal aid organizations statewide gathered with community members to **urge the governor and legislators to stabilize these services with immediate and ongoing funding to make up for massive cuts to a key federal resource for all crime victim services in the state.**

The Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) has funded the bulk of services that Washington state crime victims need to recover from traumatic experiences. Services for children and adults range from medical exams, therapy, child forensic interviews, legal services and advocacy, emergency housing for families, Crime Victims Compensation and more.

VOCA, a non-taxpayer source of federal funding allocated to all states that draws on collections of fines, fees and settlements from federal prosecutions, has fluctuated dramatically in the last decade. That fluctuation has left victim service providers in a persistent state of instability. In 2021, victim service coalitions joined together for the first time to ask legislators to backfill and stabilize victim services.

In each of the last four years, these coalitions have requested state backfill to compensate for drops in VOCA funding. The state legislature has appropriated one-time funding in each of the last four years, totaling \$64 million. The state's latest annual appropriation, \$20.6M this state fiscal year, expires in June 2025.

Despite the state backfill, since 2018, total funding available to provide these services across Washington state has dropped 51.5% and is now at a crisis point.

"Service providers have been coping with declining VOCA funding in recent years by increasing caseloads for staff, adding to waitlists, or actually closing their doors" said Judy Chen, executive director of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a rally co-host. "The network is at its weakest point ever, and when a survivor is met with a waitlist or closed door, they remain in dangerous situations as they scramble to find assistance elsewhere. This means life or death for families fleeing domestic abuse."

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“Research shows a supportive, immediate response to sexual assault survivors correlates to long-term recovery, so we were grateful when the legislature passed HB 1109, requiring law enforcement and medical teams to connect victims of sexual assault to community support services,” said Laurel Redden, communications and policy director at the King County Sexual Assault Resource Center, a member of the Washington State Sexual Assault Working Group. “That critical new right for victims rings pretty hollow if those services are not readily available in every community.”

“Imagine telling the guardian of a child who has been abused, who has limited resources, that help is not available in their own community or even county, and that they might have to travel hundreds of miles for a child forensic interview or therapeutic help,” said Paula Reed, executive director of the Children’s Advocacy Centers of Washington. “Yet, that has been happening as VOCA funds have declined. Unless the state intervenes, a whole generation of abuse survivors — particularly those in rural areas or from marginalized communities — may face a lifetime of unaddressed trauma.”

“Victims and survivors of gender-based violence bear the brunt of budget shortfalls,” said Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence Co-Executive Director Amarinthia Torres. “It takes so much courage to disclose abuse due to victim-blaming and systemic oppression in our society. Survivors deserve a robust and predictable response, which can only happen if we meaningfully fund and stabilize the advocacy programs across our state that assist them.”

The rally was co-hosted by the Children’s Advocacy Centers of Washington, Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence, Washington State Sexual Assault Working Group, and the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. These organizations will continue advocating for stabilization funding together as the session begins, starting with a week of action aimed at encouraging messages to legislators during Assembly Week in Olympia and continuing throughout the session.

A follow-up event after the legislative session begins is being planned in Olympia to deliver friendship bracelets and postcards with messages from constituents collected at the Seattle rally, along with lobbying days hosted by some of the partnering coalitions.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Video footage and still photos will be available following the event upon request.