



PATRICK SNYDER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 85th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 940

Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

February 8th, 2024

Chairman Spiros and members of the Committee:

Thank you for taking the time to allow me to testify on Assembly Bill 940. This legislation is needed because of an upcoming funding crisis caused by the federal government.

Many important survivor and victim services providers obtain funding through the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Fund, the largest funding source for victim services both locally and nationally. This fund is supported through fees and fines resulting from the victims' federal court cases. However, while the need for domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect, and sexual abuse against children services continues to increase, crimes are going underreported and under prosecuted. The federal government has also sought to settle more of these cases out of court through deferred prosecution agreements and non-prosecution agreements, further inhibiting funding from going into the program. This resulted in the enactment of the VOCA Fix to Sustain the Crime Victims Fund Act of 2021, which requires monetary penalties from these agreements to go into the Crimes Victims Fund. While this reform is a step in the right direction, it will still take years for the fund to recuperate the funds lost in the preceding years.

As a result, services are being cut across the country. For instance, the federal Department of Justice announced that Wisconsin could expect a 40% drop in funding next year. According to the Office of Crime Victim Services, the cut in funding would only be able to support 52 of the 135 current VOCA programs in the state. This looming catastrophe was first brought to my attention by Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) across the State. CACs provide multi-disciplinary approaches to investigating and substantiating child abuse and neglect. CAC's work with law enforcement and are trained to interview child victims in a friendly manner and in a less traumatic environment than a police station. I have long sought to support CACs who are vital partners working with our law enforcement to protect the most vulnerable and damaged children across Wisconsin.

Additionally, this legislation would provide stopgap funding to domestic violence centers who also provide critical services across our State. According to a 2022 statewide homicide report, Wisconsin lost 96 lives due to domestic violence last year. This is the highest total since 2000, and a 20% increase from 2021's record-breaking total of 80 people. The loss of federal VOCA funding could leave large gaps in services for some of our most important and vital needs.

While I am proud to have authored this legislation, I am disappointed that I had to. Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



February 8th, 2024

Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Testimony on 2023 Assembly Bill 940

Relating to: funding for victim services and domestic abuse services, training for grant recipients, grants to child advocacy centers, and making an appropriation

Dear Committee Members:

The federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Fund, which is the largest funding source for victim services both locally and nationally, is facing a devastating shortfall. This fund is supported through fees and fines resulting from the victims' federal court cases, and it has seen decreasing revenues in recent years. Crimes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect, and sexual abuse against children have gone underreported and under prosecuted, and the federal government has sought to settle more of these cases out of court through deferred prosecution agreements.

This hit to the fund's finances led Congress to pass the VOCA Fix to Sustain the Crime Victims Fund Act of 2021, which requires money penalties from these agreements to go into the Crimes Victims Fund. However, the years of reduced funding has left VOCA in a hole that will take years to rebound from, even with these reforms.

Unfortunately, the critical services provided by the fund are taking the brunt of the funding crisis. Back in October, the federal Department of Justice announced that Wisconsin could expect a 40% drop in funding next year. According to the Office of Crime Victim Services, the cut in funding would only be able to support 52 of the 135 current VOCA programs in the state.

These cuts are coming at a time when abuse is on the rise. According to a 2022 statewide homicide report, Wisconsin lost 96 lives due to domestic violence last year. This is the highest total since 2000, and a 20% increase from 2021's record-breaking total of 80 people.

Our child advocacy centers, or CACs, are also struggling. CACs work with law enforcement to investigate and support efforts to thwart child abuse and neglect. For example, they will often interview victims on behalf of police departments because CACs tend to be in more child-friendly environments that are less traumatic to the children being questioned. As a former police chief, I utilized CACs quite often, and I think they are an incredibly valuable resource for our state.

Assembly Bill 940 provides crucial funding for these programs. The bill increases funding for DOJ-awarded grants for organizations that provide services to victims of sexual assault by \$7 million in 2023-24, and \$18 million in 2024-25; and it also increases funding for DCF-awarded grants to organizations that provide domestic violence services by \$7 million in fiscal year 2023-24 and \$18 million in 2024-25. This bill also advances the important work of CACs combating child abuse by increasing funding for DOJ contracts to specified child advocacy centers from \$17,000 each year to \$150,000 each year while creating a new CAC in Ozaukee County and funds the statewide organizing body.

Thank you all again for listening about this important legislation. I am happy to take any questions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James
23rd Senate District



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February 8, 2024

Testimony in support of Assembly Bill 940 (information only)

Relating to funding for victim services and domestic abuse services, training for grant recipients, grants to child advocacy centers, and making an appropriation.

Introductions

Want to start out by introducing OCVS –

- Office within DOJ
- Relevant to today – administer victim services funding across the state
- Today we are talking about two separate asks within the same bill –
- CAC state funding and general funding for victim services in lieu of or in supplement to federal VOCA funds
 - DOJ administers both state CAC funding and the federal VOCA dollars
 - Which is why we are providing information for the hearing today
- OCVS supports both – it is **all of our** responsibilities to take care of crime victims in our state
- And as many of you may be aware, DOJ is also advocating for sustainable federal VOCA funding at the federal level
 - Specifically, we are advocating for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to authorize much-needed 2024 bridge funding to reduce volatility in victim services funding nation-wide
 - However, that does not change the need for state dollars to support victims in our communities

Summary of current CAC state funding

- CAC funding is a state allocation outlined in state statute 165.96
- \$17,000 for 15 CAC's – total \$255,000 annually
- The increased state CAC allocation will reduce some of the burden on federal victim services funding (ask is \$150,000 annually to CAC's)

Summary of federal VOCA funding and the looming cuts:

- Wisconsin's largest source of federal funding for victims and survivors of crime
 - Has assisted in sustaining victim services in WI for many years
 - Most notably after a large increase in 2018
- For context:
- VOCA is a formula grant
 - That means that the formula determines how much we get, we cannot ask for more
 - The formula includes a base amount for states with the remaining allocation dependent on state population
 - And then, WI DOJ/OCVS is the administering agency of federal VOCA dollars
- OCVS funded agencies at approximately \$44.5 million annually since 2019 (with ARPA dollars as a stopgap as we have seen these reductions coming for a long time)
- National reduction in VOCA funding
 - Resulting in a reduced award for WI
- Although we've been able to maintain the \$44.5 million until this year,
- In August 2023 the Office for Victims of Crime at the federal level – notified states that the Crime Victims Fund has continued to reduce
- **How CVF impacts Wisconsin's VOCA Award**
 - VOCA grants are funded by the Crime Victims Fund (CVF)
 - CVF is a revenue source created by fines and fees in federal cases
 - Over several years, the deposits to the CVF have reduced
 - In turn, this causes decreases to the amount allocated to VOCA grants

As a result, Wisconsin will only have \$13 million available through VOCA for victim service organizations across the state beginning October 1, 2024

- Repeat - \$44.5 million to just \$13 million
- This is not just a WI issue, national
- Many states have already felt the impact and taken action
 - For example,
 - Utah lawmakers -approved a record \$30 million for victim services in 2023
 - Distributed over 3 years for child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual violence
 - Maryland lawmakers – approved up to a \$60 million annual allocation for victim services in May 2023
 - Together with the amount received under VOCA in the prior year, a total of \$60 million will be allocated

- **Both efforts focus on stabilization for victims of crime – this is what we need in Wisconsin**

OCVS has a unique perspective from our varying roles in victim services throughout Wisconsin. For example, we work directly with victims of crime,

- Provide training and TA to and foster collaboration amongst stakeholders working in victim services, including our statewide victim services coalitions, and
- Administer tens of millions of dollars in victim services and justice systems funding each year
- That fund essential systems and programs involved in criminal justice and victim service provision, including LE, prosecution, courts, and victim services.

As you can imagine, these reductions are devastating.

- Based on data from current VOCA subrecipients, DOJ estimates there are a minimum (pooled positions) of –
 - 1013 individuals in a position fully or partly funded by the current VOCA project
 - 510 individuals in a position that is more than 50% funded by the current VOCA project
 - The significant decrease in funding across the state will have a substantial impact on the lives of victims, survivors, advocates, and many other professionals

We now want to highlight the importance of victim services and why we are asking for your support –

I am going to pass over to my colleague, Alexandra Stanley, to talk about why victim services matter

Thank you, Teresa. Victim services are the foundation to healing and empowerment for a survivor of crime. As a former VOCA-funded victim advocate in both the community and criminal justice system, I have witnessed firsthand the positive impact that dedicated victim advocates have on survivors and their families who are our community members.

Victim advocates work in the community and in the systems. This work goes beyond just comforting victims and holding hands, and I challenge us to redefine this misconception:

- Victim advocates are skillful navigators of the many systems survivors encounter on their path toward healing and empowerment. Advocates hold

these systems accountable by mastering processes and building strong working relationships with the people working in these systems.

- Advocates provide a crucial link between different community programs, healthcare, schools, child welfare, and the criminal justice system.
- The following types of positions and programs are funded with VOCA grant dollars:
 - Victim advocates at non-profit agencies (including bilingual advocates, legal advocates, shelter advocates and more)
 - Legal service providers – VOCA-funded attorneys provide free representation for domestic violence restraining orders, divorce, housing, public benefits, expungement, and more
 - District Attorneys' Offices Victim/Witness coordinators and specialists
 - Mental health services – therapy, support groups, and healing programs
 - Crime response advocates, including those responding to a mass victimization event
 - Court Appointed Special Advocate Programs (CASA)
 - Sexual Assault Response Teams (SART) – advocacy during medical and forensic examinations
 - Tribal-specific advocacy programs

Without the necessary resources to fund all these types of advocacy, other critical systems in our communities will be impacted.

For example –

Child Advocacy Centers:

- are a critical resource for children, their families, and the criminal justice system
- child victims are often retraumatized by having to tell the story of their victimization over and over, especially if they must testify in court
- Wisconsin already faces lack of sufficient access to forensic interviewers for children
- Without continued and additional funding these resources will no longer be available for our children

Victim Services Organizations:

- will be forced to lay off staff. Shelters will close.
- there will be a staggering amount of victim services professionals without work
- there will be fewer victim service professionals available to:
 - accompany survivors of sexual assault during a SANE exam;

- ensure that victim's constitutionally and statutorily protected rights are respected;
- help bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between the criminal justice system and Wisconsin's immigrant residents, a crucial role played by our bilingual advocates
- provide necessary long-term case management and support to victims on their complicated road to recovery and potential pursuit of justice;
- help guide victims through the criminal justice process, putting more pressure and responsibility on prosecutors and law enforcement;

Prosecution and Law Enforcement:

- will not have nearly enough advocates to help support victims during an investigation
- not only is this a right afforded to victims, but victim service providers and law enforcement agree this is best practice
- Prosecutors and law enforcement will struggle to maintain contact with victims unsupported by long-term advocates and victim-based prosecution will become increasingly more challenging.

I will now pass it on to **Special Agent in Charge Melissa Fus** from the Division of Criminal Investigation's Human Trafficking Bureau.

Good morning!

My name is Melissa Fus, and I am the Special Agent in Charge of the Human Trafficking agents with the Wisconsin Department of Justice-Division of Criminal Investigation, also known as DCI. DCI is the law enforcement component of DOJ. I supervise the human trafficking agents throughout the state of Wisconsin who are based out of the Milwaukee, Madison, Appleton, Eau Claire, and Wausau field offices. I also serve in a leadership capacity on the Wisconsin Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force with Project Respect, a victim service provider and in a leadership capacity on the Wisconsin Labor Trafficking Multi-Disciplinary Team with United Migrant Opportunity Service (UMOS), a victim service provider. Additionally, I collaborate with the FBI Human Trafficking Taskforce. I share this with you to qualify the perspective in which I'm offering testimony on behalf of DCI on this very important topic.

As all of you know, the world is ever-changing, and so are best practices that pertain to victim-based crimes. When I began my law enforcement career in 2003, the industry standard pertaining to crime victims involved addressing their respective crisis by investigating the reported crime for the purpose of prosecution of the victim's offender. Our righteous hope for the victim was that after receiving closure they

would “move on with their life.” The flaw with this mindset that has since been recognized in the law enforcement community is that even if successful prosecution of an offender is achieved, it is only one part of the equation in order for crime victims to heal and normalize. Today’s best practices in regards to victim-based crimes must involve a collaboration between law enforcement, victim service providers and victim advocacy groups who embrace a victim-centered approach, focus on victim empowerment, and employ protocols with an objective of avoiding re-victimization. While law enforcement’s primary role in victim-based crimes is the investigation/prosecution of the offender, it is the role of victim service providers and victim advocacy groups to assist the crime victim during the investigation, during prosecution and post prosecution to heal and normalize.

To further illustrate the application of the present-day best practices of victim-based crimes, I would like to share a perspective with you that was enlightening to me during my first human trafficking investigation. I had received a tip on a minor that was being trafficked in one of our large Wisconsin cities. The minor was from a wealthier suburb in the southcentral part of the state. The minor was groomed online by the trafficker and eventually engaged in commercial sex acts. The minor was recovered with another minor at a hotel. I spent many of the following days attempting to connect with the minor based on my training and experience which was when I realized that my experience at the time was not enough. We all know that teenagers have a tendency to be complex, and now I was working with a teenager that was victimized but did not have the same perspective of the victimization as I did. So, I reached out and collaborated with a local victim service provider. The victim utilized some of the services and support when they were comfortable in doing so. The minor in this case occasionally ran away and would have intermittent contact with the victim service provider and me. By engaging a victim service provider during this investigation, the minor victim always had the right type of support available when needed. Due the vast amount of time involved in any human trafficking investigation; it is extremely important to provide continuing support via victim service providers during the investigation as well as after. Large or small law enforcement entities alone cannot provide the support that the victim service providers did for this investigation. Approximately five months after receiving the initial tip, the trafficker was arrested with additional victims. The trafficker was prosecuted and pled guilty on the first day of the trial. Again, the minor and their family needed support that DCI was not equipped to provide during the weeks leading up to the trial date. The district attorney’s office victim advocates also were limited in their capacity for support. Due to our respective lack of capacity for the level of victim support as recognized in this case, community-based providers became critical. Approximately one year after the conviction, in the middle of the night, the victim reached out to me and asked if this was still my number and I confirmed and then they disconnected the call. The victim struggled with drug addiction which was

introduced by the trafficker for many years after the victimization. About four years after I received the random phone call from the victim, I received an email from the victim. The email depicted a photo of the victim's family and provided an update on the achievements made. The victim thanked me for helping and said that they thought of me often and what I did for them. I revisit that email often for self-reflection as well as what can we do better as an agency, and now as a state. This case was an example of how teams of law enforcement, victim service providers, systems-based entities, and child protective services are all, not only critical when supporting crime victims, but an industry best practice!

Now, you just heard from Alex on the effects that the lack of funding will have on the victim service organizations. You also heard from Alex on the various and many services that are provided by these entities for crime victims. Many of these support services she described are not covered by insurance but with the very funding you are deciding on. This funding or the lack of this funding for these organizations will not only have an impact on those systems but also on law enforcement. This will affect the ability of law enforcement to provide a victim centered approach with investigations if these entities are no longer existing.

As I described earlier, in my law enforcement experience I have noticed a shift in law enforcement practices and training that addresses victims needs and connecting victims with community resources. This is progress for law enforcement, and it continues to improve daily. However, this transition also needs to be exhibited by the state legislature and provide the financial support to victim service providers to demonstrate that it is important for our Badger State and to victims in this state.

As you know, anyone can be a victim of a crime. This includes your son, daughter, niece, nephew, grandchild, spouse, or partner. So, I ask you today, could you look them in the eye and tell them that you have done everything in your well-respected position to support victims of crimes? I ask you; do you know what you would do or where to start if your family member or loved one fell victim to a crime? And finally, I ask you, are you prepared to see the effects the lack of funding will have on our state, in *your* communities?

The arrest and prosecution of a trafficker or other crime offender should not be the *only* desired outcome for victim-based crimes as victim support is just as important, if not more important, in order for a victim to heal and return to their new version of normal. For this to occur, the key component is collaboration with victim service providers, victim advocacy groups, and system-based entities.

In closing, I would like to take a moment to thank those victim service providers and entities that are here today and those that are not. On behalf of DCI, your collaboration and work with crime victims is greatly appreciated!

In conclusion –

Wisconsin communities care deeply about victims of crime and understand the necessity of these services

Victims of crime are our children, our spouses, our parents, siblings, our neighbors and friends, and even us

We are asking Wisconsin leadership to join us in supporting victims and survivors of crime

to make sure they have what they need to

- be safe
- heal, and
- ultimately succeed after victimization

Thank you.

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TO: Chair Spiros, Vice-Chair Schutt, and Honorable Members of the Assembly
Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

FROM: Ragen Shapiro, Legislative Advisor

DATE: February 8, 2024

SUBJECT: Assembly Bill 940

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is committed to the goal that every individual and family in Wisconsin deserves to be safe and free from violence in their homes. DCF is testifying in strong support of AB-940. Without action this session, domestic violence agencies across Wisconsin will provide fewer services, and many will likely need to shut their doors altogether.

Currently, DCF funds victim services for 81 non-profit organizations and 10 tribes. The agencies provide a variety of **essential** services for individuals impacted by domestic violence including shelter care, advocacy, counseling services, accompaniment to medical appointments or transportation assistance. In 2022, WI providers served nearly **38,000** individuals. They responded to over **100,000** calls for help. They provided over **250,000** nights of shelter to those impacted by domestic violence. **Nearly half** of individuals staying at domestic violence shelters are children accompanying their parent, who are often desperately working to keep them safe from harm.

Wisconsin is currently facing the impacts from unprecedented levels of domestic violence. Wisconsin's most recent 2022 statewide homicide report showed the **highest** loss of life due to domestic violence ever (a 20% increase compared to the year prior). According to the recent report "Economic Impact of Domestic Violence in Milwaukee and Wisconsin", more than **1 in 3** women in Wisconsin will experience domestic violence over the course of their lifetimes. In Wisconsin, over **90,000 women every year** will experience domestic violence. This does untold damage to the citizens of our state and their children.

These numbers only tell part of the story. DCF is so very grateful to the survivors who were willing to share their stories, which are included along with this testimony. These stories remind us that the stakes of these decisions are high; and that it is not hyperbole to say that for many, these services can be the difference between life and death.

DCF is proud of the service provided by grantees, who work to provide the best possible services to individuals and families in crisis. Despite this, a recent survey showed that at a minimum, **20%** of requests for domestic abuse supports went **unanswered** due to lack of resources. In 2022, nearly **13,000** requests for shelter were unfulfilled because a shelter bed was unavailable. **At DCF's current funding levels**, Wisconsin's domestic violence services have not been able to keep up with the increasing need for services. Survivors whose needs go unmet often have no choice but to stay and endure continued violence.

This increased need for services will be further impacted by significant cuts in federal funding. Wisconsin has seen precipitous federal funding decreases to support domestic violence survivors since 2019. In addition to these already deep cuts, the federal Department of Justice has announced that Wisconsin will receive another **40% decrease** in federal funding starting in 2024. This will result in DOJ's Office of Crime Services funding fewer than **half** of the programs that currently receive funding. This will translate to fewer survivors being served, but also less comprehensive and qualified supports available to those who are able to access services.

Providing additional funding to support survivors, also makes good fiscal sense. Domestic Violence has an estimated impact of **\$658 million** in economic losses to the state of Wisconsin. Wisconsin can change its trajectory by investing in **supporting** survivors. Economic analysis have shown that a \$1 Investment in domestic violence assistance **saves over \$9** in a variety of costs. Private and local funding will not be able to close the gap in Wisconsin. Most domestic violence agencies already braid of variety of funding sources in order to cover the basic services needed for survivors. A recent survey of Wisconsin providers found that most agencies **already** rely on private donations and community support for roughly half their existing funding. A strategic state investment to replace federal funds is crucial to providing much needed services in 2024 and in years to come.

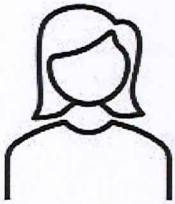


Client Testimonials

Survivors of Domestic Violence

"These and many other stories reflect the reality of survivor experiences and the types of services provided to keep them safe. The support they are afforded when our domestic abuse and sexual assault programs and shelters have the funding they need to remain open, is what helps to keep survivors safe."

- Domestic Violence Agency Representative



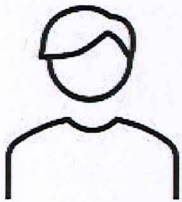
Crystal

Crystal was in an intense relationship with her partner, who she lived with. Her partner grew violent and abusive. At a small party that included Crystal's family members, he became angry and attacked her. His blows caused a fracture to Crystal's eye socket, a brain bleed, and permanent blindness in one eye. She was hospitalized for days because of these injuries.

Feeling broken and unsupported by law enforcement and judicial systems, Crystal approached a domestic violence agency with targeted services to her cultural background. An advocate worked with her to determine what needed to be done to get her **feeling safe and stable**. Through the partnership of Crystal and her advocate, a restraining order was filed against Crystal's abuser within weeks. He was then arrested.

The advocate also stayed by Crystal's side and was a source of emotional support at her revocation hearing. At the hearing, the District Attorney reversed their previous decision to not file charges. This move was **possible only through the advocate's perseverance**.

A week after the abuser's arrest, Crystal brought treats to the DV agency's office to thank them for their critical support. She said **for the first time since her attack, she was able to sleep**.

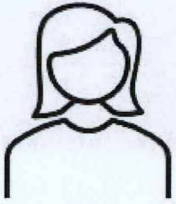


Dan

Dan was involved in an abusive relationship and needed extensive help in getting out of his relationship, obtaining custody of his daughters, Ann and Mary, and finding a safe, healthy living environment to provide for his family.

Domestic violence agency advocates **successfully helped Dan to leave his abuser, accompanied him to court, assisted with the custody process, and helped him secure safe, affordable housing**. Dan lives with a disability which makes it difficult for him to have employment. Agency advocates further helped connect him with CARES funded programs to assist him in affording his housing and even found furnishings for his new apartment. **He had to completely start over with a new life and reports that "He couldn't have done it without the help of [agency]."**

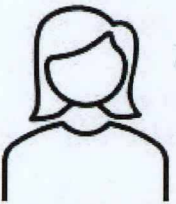




Rhonda

Rhonda, a 28-year-old mother of four, came to an agency after her abuser attacked her publicly in the presence of witnesses and her children. Witnesses called the authorities, fearing for her safety. Because this was not the first police contact regarding the abuse, police officers on the scene contacted Child Protective Services. Within just a few days following the incident, Rhonda's children were removed from her custody. The case worker told her she needed to find her own place away from the abuser, and take domestic violence prevention courses. As a result, Rhonda left her home with only a few possessions, and became homeless, sleeping in her car.

While homeless, she found a domestic violence agency on social media and shared her dire situation. Over the next eight months, Rhonda **worked with this DV agency to not only take prevention courses, but to file a restraining order, get a job, and secure housing.** During this time, Rhonda was granted a reunification hearing. Once her advocate heard this, she collected donations for Rhonda's children so they would have new clothing, toys, and bedding when they came home. As a result of the services Rhonda received and her dedication to being reunited with family, **Rhonda's children were returned to her.** Rhonda said that she will always recommend that women receive services from the agency that helped her. **She said the agency exceeded her expectations, and she will be forever grateful.**



Grace

Grace arrived at a domestic violence agency in desperate need of food and shelter. She shared with staff what had happened that led her to their door. Grace's relationship with her husband of 17 years was one marred by extreme emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. He often threatened to beat her or used violence to force her to perform sexual acts with others for money that was used to support his substance misuse. Their seven children were removed from their custody due to his abuse and substance addiction. Each day of Grace's life was one of struggle: no hot water and little to no food in the household, which led her to depend on food pantries and restaurant dumpsters to survive.

Grace had no support from family and little faith in the system, but she knew she needed to reach out for help; she became increasingly afraid her husband would kill her. **Advocates moved quickly to put her up in a motel** after accompanying her to her home to safely collect her things and important papers. Advocates provided Grace with food and personal hygiene items, and through their connections with other community-based organizations, they were also able to get her clothes, shoes, and blankets.

Now in a healthier, safer space, Grace decided to pursue the thing she'd wanted to for years: finding her daughter who had been removed by Child Protective Services and was now 21 years-old. Grace's advocates helped her find her daughter – who had also been looking for Grace – through social media. The two reunited, and Grace moved in with her daughter and recently met her grandchildren for the first time.

Together, they are rebuilding their lives as individuals and as a family.



Client Testimonials: Survivors of Domestic Violence



Lily

Locked in the basement with no food or water, a pregnant woman named Lily clung to hope. She was successful in sneaking her abuser's phone before he retreated up the stairs earlier that day. She began typing into the search bar, "battered women's shelter near me" she dialed the first number she saw and heard a voice say, "Thank you for calling [Program Name], how can I help you?"

Three days later, Lily was finally free. She successfully escaped the basement and made it to the safety of her advocate's car waiting nearby. She arrived at the domestic violence agency's shelter and began safety planning with an advocate. Although she was now in a safe location, she knew she and her unborn baby needed medical attention. She had not seen a doctor since her abuser had sexually assaulted her and she became pregnant. She was also severely malnourished and had scrapes and bruises from living in a basement and crawling out a window to escape. Lily decided she wanted to go to the emergency room to seek care.

Two advocates transported her to the hospital and provided her with support. Lily was terrified of her abuser finding her. **An advocate stayed by her side the entire time, holding her hand and assuring her she was not alone.** Over the next few days, she received medical care and advocacy in the hospital.

If it wasn't for the domestic violence agency, Lily, and her unborn baby may still be locked in that basement. She would not have received medical care for the violence she endured. This experience serves as a reminder that to end violence, **it is crucial that domestic violence agencies are always there to answer the calls of survivors.**



Dear Chairperson Spiros and members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety,

The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA) and End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin appreciates the opportunity to offer this written testimony for your consideration. WCASA and End Abuse WI function both to support and represent member Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence service providers respectively, while advancing the movement to end violence in the state and nationally. We thank Committee Chair James for holding a public hearing on this bill today and for his leadership on this legislation. We also thank Senator Agard and Representatives Conley and Snyder for their leadership on this legislation in both houses.

Sexual and domestic violence are significant problems in Wisconsin.

- 658,000 women have experienced rape in their lifetime (1 in 4).
- 1,300,000 women have experienced contact sexual violence (1 in 2).
- 637,000 men have experienced contact sexual violence (1 in 4).
- In 2022, 96 individuals died in Wisconsin due to domestic violence at a rate of approximately one death every 3.8 days.
- 1 in every 6 domestic violence homicides in the United States happens in Wisconsin.
- The annual economic cost of domestic violence in Wisconsin is estimated at \$657 million.

The Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds victim service providers across Wisconsin; services provided under this program include safety planning, community service referrals, counseling, crisis intervention and legal advocacy. Currently, the Wisconsin Department of Justice (WI DOJ) awards \$44.5 million per year. Unfortunately, the Department of Justice announced that their projected award for FY 2024 will be approximately \$13 million which amounts to a 70% reduction. This is due to significant reductions in deposits to the Crime Victims Fund (CVF), over the past several years, which is the source of VOCA funding at the federal level. Finally, WI DOJ is expecting they will have a cap of \$250k on awards per grantee.

The consequences of the reduction in VOCA awards will be devastating to service providers across the state. This includes programs being forced to lay off staff, reduce services, and/or shut their doors. The impact will fall hardest on the smallest programs, particularly programs in rural communities, low-income communities, and Communities of Color. Potentially thousands of victims statewide will lose access to lifesaving and life-sustaining child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other victim services. Without access to these critical services, the real-time impact will not only be felt by individuals and families but will also ripple through our communities.

The Sexual Assault Victim Services (SAVS) Grant Program, administered by the WI DOJ is the only state program that funds sexual violence prevention initiatives and direct services for survivors and their families. The Domestic Violence (DV) services program administered through the Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the only state program that funds domestic violence prevention initiatives.



SAVS is currently funded at **\$2.235 million** annually and DV services are currently funded at **\$12.4 million** annually. Those funding levels have been static for the past decade. Even at existing levels, SAVS and DV Services funding do not meet the needs of survivors in Wisconsin. For example, on a single day in Wisconsin last year, victims made 319 requests for services that programs could not provide because they did not have the resources. Approximately 74% of these unmet requests were for emergency shelter, hotels, motels, and other housing. That works out to be 116,435 survivors per year without access to critical and lifesaving services. Additionally, many programs are currently struggling with staff turnover, due primarily to low salary rates, high stress levels, and on-call requirements. This will be exacerbated if programs are forced to lay off staff due to funding cuts, which will mean fewer services available for survivors. Finally, this also comes at a time when many programs are reporting an increase in demand for sexual assault services.

In terms of how we arrived at the specific funding levels in the legislation, for FY 2023-24, \$14 million represents the baseline level of funding we believe is necessary to meet the needs of survivors in Wisconsin. For the SAVS program, a \$7 million increase is necessary to hire enough Full-Time Employees (FTEs) for grantees to meet the needs of survivors. For DV services, a \$7 million increase is required to respond to the unmet requests for services by survivors across the state. For FY 2024-25, we continue the baseline amount of \$14 million as described above. We also included an increase of \$22 million during that fiscal year to account for the projected shortfall in VOCA funding which will begin on 10/1/24. To arrive at \$22 million, we used the [list of VOCA grantees](#) from WI DOJ that are SA/DV providers to estimate how much of the \$44.5 million currently awarded funds SA/DV services. Using that list, approximately \$30 million out of the total \$44.5 million funds SA/DV services. Applying the 70% reduction in funding to \$30 million results in a \$22 million reduction in VOCA funding for SA/DV services in FY 24. As a result, we included an additional increase of \$11 million for both SA and DV services in FY 24-25 to account for the projected shortfall in VOCA funding.

Now is the time for Wisconsin to make an investment in sexual and domestic violence services and prevention. Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony today. We appreciate the Committee's thoughtful consideration and urge you to please pass this lifesaving legislation. Please contact Jenna Gormal jennag@endabusewi.org and Ian Henderson ianh@wcasa.org with any further questions.

TO: Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
FROM: Lauren Hamvas & Abby Bar-Lev Wiley, Legal Action of Wisconsin;
Megan Lee, Judicare Legal Aid
DATE: 01/25/2023
RE: AB 940's Positive Impact on Our Clients & Client Communities

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of AB 940. We are deeply grateful to help raise awareness of the scope of devastation wrought by the VOCA cuts, and to support this bill that would provide critical financial support to so many important organizations in the DV/SA community.

We are here representing Legal Action of Wisconsin and Judicare Legal Aid. Our two non-profit law firms work together to ensure that all low-income Wisconsinites—from Milwaukee to Ashland—receive high-quality, free legal assistance for their civil legal problems. A large portion of our work is funded by VOCA, including our Elder Rights Project, which represents elderly victims of crime, our Family Law work representing victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in divorce proceedings and orders for protection, and our Crime Victims' Rights project, which represents victims of crime who otherwise often lack a voice in criminal proceedings. In fact, our collaborative, statewide Crime Victims' Rights Project submitted an appeal and argued the case in front of the Wisconsin Supreme Court to ensure that victims' private mental health records could not be examined and unfairly used against them in a criminal trial—and we won, overturning long-standing precedent.

We are speaking here today in favor of AB 940 because our survivor-clients deeply depend on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault (DV/SA) agencies. VOCA funding cuts are already being deeply felt across the DVSA landscape, including in areas like safety planning, community service referrals, counseling, crisis intervention, and legal services. VOCA cuts will decimate these critical lifelines—including our work providing legal representation to survivors—if the State does not help cover the gap.

There are many pieces to the puzzle that a survivor must navigate in the course of their journey from being victimized to finding healing. There is no single navigator walking that individual through the steps. Organizations rely on each other to help ensure that a survivor has the information they need to easily and confidently continue their healing journey. Tragically, the VOCA cuts mean that many survivors will now fall through the cracks, and it is not certain that they will be able to find and obtain the help they need. This bill would provide a critical support to many DV/SA agencies that our clients—and our firms—rely upon, to ensure that they can continue to help survivors through a crisis.

While AB 940 does not include legal services, legal aid is another critical resource facing insurmountable gaps in coverage due to funding cuts. Together, Legal Action and Judicare are the primary sources of lawyers for victims of crime, and we work collaboratively with DV/SA agencies, law enforcement, and DA's offices to provide necessary legal help to victims of crime. To help better understand the scope of the VOCA cuts, we wanted to share just a few client stories with you.

Helping Sharon navigate a criminal sexual assault case as a survivor

In our work in the statewide crime victims' rights project, we often interact with different VOCA-funded partners. Our client, Sharon, was a woman in her 50s who had been sexually assaulted in her home. During the assault, Sharon experienced injuries that required multiple surgeries. After the assault, Sharon sought services through her local DV/SA agency. Sharon worked with an advocate to seek supportive services and help find stability after a devastating trauma. This advocate worked with other community agencies to connect Sharon

with crucial supports to stabilize her employment, get access to medical care, and secure her mental health treatment. We got involved with the case to help Sharon protect her mental health records within the criminal case and to help her better understand and advocate for her rights as a crime victim. With Sharon's permission, we collaborated with her advocate to best meet her needs. Her advocate helped get Sharon to doctor appointments, surgeries, and court hearings in the criminal case. I worked with the advocate to ensure that Sharon's concerns were being addressed and her needs were being met. Through this collaboration, we were able to empower Sharon to regain control in her life and begin the difficult process of healing after a sexual assault that left deep mental and physical injuries.

Helping Tara divorce an abusive spouse

Another one of our attorneys worked with a rural DV/SA agency to help walk a client, Tara, through leaving her abusive spouse. Tara and her young children were still living with her abuser when she started working with Judicare and her local DV/SA agency to seek guidance on leaving. Tara's spouse controlled her mail, phone, and email, severely restricting her access to help. Fortunately, Judicare was able to work with Tara's advocate at her local DV/SA agency to connect with Tara when she was outside of her husband's close supervision. Tara wanted to leave her abusive spouse but was afraid that he would try to get her arrested for kidnapping if she fled with the children. We provided Tara with legal advice about leaving and starting the divorce process, in collaboration with her advocate. Tara was able to move herself and her children out of the house, into a safe situation with relatives. Tara is now in the process of getting divorced from her abusive spouse and on the path the rebuilding her life for herself and her children.

Helping Morty obtain a restraining order & return home

Morty is elderly and disabled. He was being physically abused by his live-in girlfriend. Morty did not have transportation or a phone to seek help. The local DV agency moved him into a hotel for temporary safety and helped Morty get connected with us for legal assistance with a restraining order. While the agency arranged for a phone for Morty, they coordinated communication between Morty and Legal Action so that he could prepare for the upcoming hearing. We were able to obtain the Restraining Order for Morty and remove his abuser from the home so that he could return safely. Without the coordination between the agencies, he may have remained in an unsafe, abusive situation.

Bypassing an abusive spouse to empower Marcy

Another former client, Marcy, had been in an abusive marriage for over 40 years. Marcy has significant physical disabilities and is functionally mute. This made her heavily reliant on her husband for care, which he used as a means to control her. The only time he would allow her to be separated from him was for her monthly counseling appointments (where he remained in the waiting room). The domestic violence agency staff coordinated her counseling appointments with us and would help us sneak in through a back door, so that her husband was unaware that she was meeting with us during a part of the session. Thanks to the DV agency, we were able to empower Marcy with the information and assistance that she needed, including eventually removing her husband as healthcare power of attorney, his access to her healthcare records, and we were able to give her advice about divorce and restraining orders.

There are many ways that legal services helps victims of crime, but we could not be effective advocates without the critical work done by the many DV/SA agencies for which AB 940 would keep the lights on. Thank you to the advocates who worked on this bill and to the legislature and Committee for considering how the bill would benefit crime victims and DV/SA agencies across the state.



**Testimony in regard to VOCA Funding Bill (AB 940)
Thursday, February 8th 2024**

Noelle Fenwick | noelle@reachcounseling.com
Associate Director, Reach Counseling

Honorable members of the legislature,

I am here before you as the Associate Director of Reach Counseling. Reach is the sexual assault service provider for Winnebago, Outagamie, and Calumet Counties. Our mission has always been to heal lives and transform communities through our comprehensive services, including trauma counseling, victim advocacy, prevention education, and sex offender treatment.

In 2023, throughout the tri-county, we provided 3,985 trauma counseling sessions for survivors and their support systems, our team also provided personal, medical and legal advocacy for 293 survivors, responded to 101 SANE exams, provided prevention education for over 9,000 youth, and helped keep our community safe by reducing the odds of reoffending through 1,498 sex offender treatment sessions.

I am also here before you as a survivor of sexual assault. My presence here, my ability to speak to you today, is a living testament to the life-saving impact of organizations like Reach Counseling. If it weren't for organizations like Reach, I might not be here to share my story.

My journey as a survivor began in my freshman year of college, a time that should have been filled with discovery and growth. Instead, it was stained by an experience that left me feeling broken and lost. Over the course of the last eight years, I have endured multiple assaults, each one a stark reminder of the pervasive nature of sexual violence in our society.

After each assault, I was engulfed by a sense of despair so deep that moving forward seemed impossible. The world around me continued its pace, but I was stuck, reliving the trauma, struggling with a pain that felt insurmountable. It was during these darkest moments that services like Reach Counseling became my beacon of hope.

Services like Reach are a lifeline that pulls survivors from the depths of despair. At Reach Counseling, we envision a world where healing is not just a possibility but a promise. We are committed to healing lives and transforming communities. But now, our ability to continue this crucial work is in jeopardy due to the drastic cuts in federal funding from the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). Reach is bracing for a loss of at least \$420,000 starting October of this year - a significant blow to our services and, most importantly, to the survivors who rely on us.

Today, I ask you to consider the personal realities of survivors like me. We are more than statistics; we are individuals whose lives have been irrevocably changed by sexual violence. I implore you to delve beyond the figures and embrace the human stories etched in the fabric of our work. The proposed funding cuts to victim services will not just impact organizations; they will directly affect the lives and recoveries of thousands of survivors. Today, I urge you, as our state's leaders, to take decisive action.

Your support in increasing funding for sexual assault and domestic violence services is crucial. It's not just about sustaining an organization; it's about giving survivors the resources they need to heal and reclaim their lives. Let us ensure that no survivor has to walk their path alone and that organizations like Reach can continue to be a haven for healing and hope.

Thank you for your time and for considering the profound impact your decision will have on the lives of survivors across our state.



Benedict Center

Compassion • Justice • Action • Transformation

February 8, 2024

Dear Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

On behalf of the Benedict Center, I am writing to urge you to support the VOCA Funding Bill, AB 940 to provide critical victim services to survivors of sexual violence, including sex trafficking, and domestic violence in Wisconsin.

The prevalence of sexual violence and domestic violence in Wisconsin is staggering. With rates as high as 1 in 5 women experiencing rape in their lifetime it is almost certain you know someone who has experienced sexual or domestic violence in our State. Worse yet, a number of domestic violence victims die at the hands of their abuser.

As January is Sex Trafficking Awareness Month, it should be noted that these funds are also key to helping survivors of sex trafficking in Wisconsin to break free of the trafficker and begin the long journey of healing.

We are proud to count ourselves among the dedicated SA/DV advocates and service providers across the state tirelessly work to provide meaningful and sometimes life-saving assistance to survivors.

The Benedict Center Sisters Program, located in Milwaukee, is perhaps the largest provider of victim services *specifically* to women in the street- based sex trade, most of whom are victims and survivors of sex trafficking, sexual assault and physical assault.

From October 1, 2022-September 30, 2023, our program provided:

- 633 women with Street Outreach Services for a total of 3,308 contacts
- 336 women with Drop In Center Services (day shelter services) for a total of 3,995 visits
- 150 women with VOCA Sexual Assault Advocacy Services

In recent years we are consistently serving more women who report more frequent and more violent sexual and physical assaults and sex trafficking experiences. Without our low-barrier, pro-active and trusted outreach services, many survivors would not reach out for help because of the fear, stigma and trauma they experience.

The Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds victim service providers across Wisconsin; services provided under this program include safety planning, community service referrals, counseling, crisis intervention and legal advocacy.

We are bracing for devastating VOCA cuts to the Benedict Center Sisters Program beginning in October 2024.

The Benedict Center Sisters Program currently has a VOCA grant of \$381,298, which represents 42% of the direct costs of the Sisters Program. The loss of 42% of program costs would force us to lay off 4 out of 10 staff members and restrict service hours. Sadly, this would mean fewer women who need low-barrier services specific to women in the sex trade would access services at a time when the violence they experience seems to be at peak levels. This loss could be magnified in 2024-2025, as other current funding relies on one-time grants and contracts.

The proposed bill to restore funding to SA and DV programs offers a tremendous solution to continue critical victim services throughout the State. It would allow us to continue our current services, reaching women who are disproportionately impacted by sexual violence and sex trafficking on the streets of Milwaukee. This not only impacts the women we serve, but their families and our communities.

Please support the legislation that will increase funding for sexual assault and domestic violence services at \$14 million for Fiscal Year 23 and \$36 million for Fiscal Year 24.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeanne Geraci". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jeanne Geraci
Executive Director



TO: Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety
FROM: Nila Grahl, Southeast Region Manager, Racine, Kenosha & Walworth Child Advocacy Centers, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Thursday, February 8, 2024
RE: Support for AB 940 – Funding for victim services, including grants to child advocacy centers

Chair Spiros and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony with you today. My name is Nila Grahl and I lead Children's Wisconsin's (Children's) child advocacy centers in Racine, Kenosha and Walworth Counties. I'm here today to share Children's strong support for this bipartisan legislation. We want to thank the bill authors Senators James and Agard, along with Representatives Snyder and Conley, for their work on this proposal, as well as several other members of this committee for cosponsoring this legislation.

Children's is the region's only independent health care system dedicated solely to the health and well-being of kids. Between our hospitals in Milwaukee and Neenah, primary, specialty and urgent care clinics and community services offices across the state – we provide kids and their families with care and services they need to promote health, safety and well-being. While today my remarks will center on care and services we provide to children who have suffered abuse, assault, neglect and trauma, I do want the committee to know that Children's also offers several prevention-focused programs and services across the state, working upstream to help support parents with education and resources, provide child abuse awareness and education for the community, and so much more.

When we think of agencies serving victims of crime, child advocacy centers (CACs) are often hidden gems in communities across the state, serving our youngest and most vulnerable victims. CACs provide unique services including forensic interviews, medical evaluations and advocacy support. When a child has made a disclosure of abuse and an investigation begins, more often than not that child is brought to a CAC. Forensic interviewers provide children with a safe space to tell their story by asking non-leading, unbiased questions that meet forensic standards. This interview is recorded and observed in real time by sensitive crime detectives, assistant district attorneys and Child Protective Service workers. Often this recorded interview is used in court, sometimes years after the alleged abuse took place, leading to critical convictions, ensuring the child victim is protected from further harm. Advocates in the CAC are also there to answer questions, offer guidance about next steps and provide referrals for ongoing care, counseling and other supports the child and family may require.

The CAC team works together to ensure that the evaluation of an abuse allegation minimizes the re-traumatization of a child. We collaborate closely with law enforcement and Child Protective Services to ensure, as often as possible, that a child only has to be seen and tell their story once during the investigation. Our work helps to start the healing process for children and their caregivers. A CAC's mission is to promote and foster safety, healing and justice for children and families. Without effective therapeutic intervention, many children who have experienced trauma may suffer ongoing or long-term adverse social, emotional, developmental and health outcomes.

In those communities that have a CAC with medical services, like the CACs I am honored to oversee with Children's Wisconsin, trained medical providers will complete comprehensive, developmentally-sensitive, trauma-informed medical evaluations and care for children who are suspected of being abused. These specially trained physicians, nurse practitioners and social workers provide consultations when there are concerns for

Children's complies with Federal civil rights laws. We do not discriminate based on race, color, national origin, age, disability or sex. Si no habla inglés, se programarán servicios de idiomas en forma gratuita. Lláame al (414) 266-7848 (TTY: 414-266-2465). Yop hais bias koj tois txawj hais lus. Askiv, peb yuav teem si hawm muab kev pab txhawj lus puib dawb rau koj. Mu rau (414) 266-7848 (TTY: 414-266-2465).

Kids deserve the best.

child abuse, neglect, sexual abuse/assault and sex trafficking. Consultations to the Child Advocacy team may consist of a range of responses appropriate to the concerns, such as phone advice, review of records or images, or a comprehensive in-person evaluation. Our multidisciplinary team provides diagnostic assessments and treatment recommendations. When appropriate, we offer assistance and guidance to children and caregivers in understanding the medical and social issues that have prompted their involvement in an investigation of suspected child maltreatment.

In 2022, nearly 6,400 kids were cared for throughout the state at Children's CACs, medical satellite locations and through our hospital-based child advocacy service. Children's is one of a number of organizations providing child advocacy services across our state. Altogether, thousands of children and their families rely on us to be there to care for and support them during this most sensitive time.

Importantly, CACs provide services to kids and their families without charge and irrespective of insurance coverage. Most of our services are not reimbursable and families going through this most challenging time should not have to face additional financial hardship to seek the care their children need and deserve. These costs are not covered by any other municipal or law enforcement agency.

The federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant is one of the funding mechanisms the state uses to support organizations across Wisconsin that provide direct services to victims of violent crime including conducting forensic interviews, safety planning, community service referrals, counseling, crisis intervention and advocacy. VOCA is funded through fines paid by federal prosecutions and distributed via a funding formula to states. The Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of Crime Victim Services passes VOCA funds through to nonprofit and government victim service agencies across the state via a competitive grant application process, including Children's Wisconsin's child advocacy centers. As a result of decreased federal fines due to an increase in deferred prosecution agreements, Wisconsin and states across the nation are anticipating a significant reduction in VOCA funding effective on October 1, 2024.

The decrease in VOCA funds will leave programs like ours without the necessary funds to continue offering the comprehensive care we do today. For six of Children's seven CACs, more than 50% of our funding comes from VOCA. These funds support essential personnel including victim advocates, mental health professionals, forensic interviewers and social workers. Across our 7 CACs, VOCA funds support 8 behavioral health clinicians, 9 forensic interviewers and 13 advocates and social workers. Our CACs are facing a minimum 55% reduction in VOCA funds this year which will result in catastrophic cuts to victim services, significantly impact our ability to provide comprehensive care for kids across the state. This could mean fewer forensic interviews which support child safety and sound prosecution decisions fostering more just outcomes, reduced access to mental and behavioral health care resources, fewer advocates to help families navigate their healing journey and reduced social worker support.

I'd like to share one example of a child seen at a Children's Wisconsin CAC recently. Our dedicated staff came in as they do each morning preparing for the kids and caregivers they would serve that day. These aren't just appointments on our schedule but young children and teens coming to us often at the moment of their greatest vulnerability. On this morning, we received a call from law enforcement asking to put a hold on our schedule for interviews and medical evaluations as they were gathering information quickly regarding reports of sexual abuse involving a 5- and 7-year-old.

When the children arrived at the CAC, we learned that the 7-year-old had gotten sick in the car on his way to the CAC and the 5-year-old had sensory needs. Our CAC team jumped into action doing what they do best to meet the physical and emotional needs of each child so they could participate in a forensic interview and medical evaluation. During the forensic interview, the 7-year-old was able to provide details and information to solidify the execution of an arrest warrant. Injuries were documented during the medical evaluation and

each child's health care needs were addressed compassionately, including next steps for follow-up care and connections with a mental health clinician integrated in our services at the CAC. These children were at our CAC for most of the day as multi-disciplinary team partners worked the investigation and identified a relative caregiver to care for the children. Several months later, our forensic interviewer and medical provider were both available to testify in court as fact and expert witnesses.

Our CACs are supported with some philanthropic gifts as well as direct financial support from Children's Wisconsin; last year, Children's invested more than \$1.5 million to support the work of our CACs. The coming reduction in VOCA funds will leave a significant gap in program budgets. This reduction in funds hits CACs especially hard since VOCA is one of the only federal grant sources they qualify to apply for to receive funds for direct services to victims. If you have seen how one CAC is funded, you have only seen how one CAC is funded. The CACs cobble together funding largely from VOCA dollars, some philanthropic dollars and local funding sources and the \$17,000 each receives in annual state funding. More sustainable funding is needed to support this vital service for victims of abuse. This bill will provide funds and allow for increased state support for direct services to care for vulnerable children and teens. This bill will help provide the financial stability to keep these critical services intact and enable us to continue to provide comprehensive services to kids and families with our small and dedicated teams.

Finally, I'd like to close by sharing a perspective of the unexpected but immeasurable value of our CACs and staff from a local District Attorney's office. This was sent to our forensic interviewer just yesterday and I was given permission to share today:

"I know you thought you were in court yesterday for expert testimony but it ended up being so much more. I noticed that one of the victims' adult family members was quietly crying during your testimony and I asked if he was ok and if he wanted to go in the hall. He said he was ok and that he wanted to stay and listen. When you were done testifying I checked in on him. He disclosed that he was a victim of abuse as a child and had tried to tell his mother but she didn't believe him. He shared that hearing you testify validated his experiences, thoughts, and feelings about what happened to him and he no longer feels alone and realizes just how often this happens to children like him. His abuse is something he has pushed deep down for many years. Hearing about the dynamics of abuse that you testified to has tremendously helped him understand and validate his experience. So- I wanted to thank you so much for what you do and let you know how you impacted a man's life in such a positive way."

AB 940 represents a lifeline, not only for CACs and the kids and families we serve, but also for the many other domestic violence and sexual assault support organizations across our state who rely on VOCA funds as well. This funding will support programs like ours in keeping staff and services available and accessible for those in our community facing adversity and abuse. On behalf of Children's Wisconsin, I encourage your support of this legislation. Thank you for your consideration and I am happy to answer questions now or in the future.

Nila Grahl
Southeast Region Manager, Racine, Kenosha & Walworth Child Advocacy Centers
Children's Wisconsin
ngrahl@childrenewi.org

Jodi Bloch
Director, State & Local Government Relations
Children's Wisconsin
608-217-9508
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Jody L. Spiegelhoff
Racine Police Department
Investigator
02/08/2024
Re: Assembly Bill 940

Hello everyone and thank you for allowing me to speak at today's hearing for Assembly Bill 940. My name is Jody Spiegelhoff and I'm a 25-year veteran of the Racine Police Department. During that time, I solely investigated Sensitive Crimes for 12 years, which were mainly crimes against children. My goal is that when I leave here today you have a clearer understanding of just how essential Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are in our community. Child Advocacy Centers not only support victims and their families after traumatic events, but they also come alongside law enforcement to serve and protect our community's most innocent victims, our children.

I can tell you that in the 12 years I specifically investigated crimes against children, the Child Advocacy Center was instrumental in helping me achieve positive outcomes for the hundreds of families I worked with, whether that positive outcome meant criminal convictions with long prison sentences or family advocacy and therapy services for the family and child.

Although many law-enforcement officers are trained in minimal fact interviewing, which is simply asking open-ended questions to children to gather basic facts, we still battle barriers in our communities. I'm not sure if you've heard but sometimes citizens don't like, or are afraid, of the police. Now, sometimes this is because of their own criminal activity, but other times it's simply what they were taught growing up. Over the years, I lost count of the number of times I heard a parent tell their child and I was going to "take them to jail" if they were naughty or that they, the parent, would go to jail because their child was talking to the police. Both of these scenarios are absurd, but they still happen today. I tell you this to stress the fact that when law enforcement can sit down with the parents of a child who was the victim of a horrible crime and explain that their child will be interviewed by a trained forensic interviewer, in a Children's Hospital facility a sense of relief comes over them. They may not think law enforcement can see the relief and comfort, but we do. It's in their faces and their body language. Those parents know their child is going to be handled with great care and compassion.

I want to share a case with you to give you an idea for just how impactful a Child Advocacy Center and their highly professional staff are when they come alongside law enforcement for any criminal case involving a child.

On June 28 and 29, 2019 three lives were changed forever after they were kidnapped at gunpoint by two suspects with masks, had clothing placed over their heads to obstruct their view, and were driven to Milwaukee where they were held against their will overnight. The next morning, the adult's head was covered again as they were escorted from the basement and driven back to Racine to commit an armed robbery at a Well Fargo Bank by using the adult female's access to the bank. The adult female was 25 years old and the other two people were

her little girls, ages 5 and 2. We'll call the mother Rose and the 5-year-old Daisy, as I'll talk about them the most today.

The Racine Police Department's robbery investigators learned that Rose worked at the bank on 06/28/2019, serving as the bank's manager, until closing at approximately 1800 hours. After Rose closed the bank, she got into her vehicle and went to pick up her girls from daycare. From there, Rose and her daughters went home. As Rose was getting her daughters out of the back of her vehicle, she was approached by two armed unknown black males who forced her and her daughters into the backseat of her vehicle at gunpoint. Rose said one of the suspects pointed the gun at her almost the entire ride.

Rose further reported to Racine Police Investigators that they were confined in a basement, where they were given a bucket to use as their bathroom and blanket with dinosaurs on it. They remained held captive in the basement overnight.

The next morning, on 6/29/2019, a third male joined the other two suspects and took Rose and her 2 daughters at gunpoint back to Wells Fargo Bank where Rose was made to open the west side door with her keys and enter the security code to disable the alarm. The three suspects entered Wells Fargo Bank and were able to gather over \$45,000.00 in cash before leaving. Luckily Rose noticed there was some confusion among the suspects as to if Rose and her daughters were supposed to leave with them or not. Rose was able to close and lock the exterior bank door, keeping the three armed suspects outside of the bank and Rose and her daughters inside. Rose then called the police.

Once patrol officers and investigators arrived on scene, it became clear that Daisy needed to be interviewed. Our investigators are familiar with and understand the importance of utilizing our Child Advocacy Center anytime a child is a victim or witness of a crime. But the problem was the robbery took place on a Saturday morning, when the Child Advocacy Center wasn't normally open. So, being that our investigators are on point I received a phone call that morning from Investigator Rob Rasmussen asking if there was any way our Child Advocacy Center would be willing to open so 5-year-old Daisy could be forensically interviewed. Two quick phone calls later and the answer was yes within minutes. Forensic Interviewer Heather Jensen met us at our Child Advocacy Center to come alongside law enforcement to interview 5-year-old Daisy. This was essential in this case as there were many things we didn't know, nor did Daisy's mother because her head was covered as the suspects drove them to the residence where they were held captive. As many of us know, children are like sponges and can soak up everything around without the adults noticing.

One thing that's important to understand is when law enforcement is actively working on any case, there are many moving parts to manage. The key for this case was to have one of those moving parts, Daisy's interview, handled by someone other than law enforcement. It was essential for me to observe Daisy's forensic interview and feed the information in real time to the other investigators as we quickly worked to identify the residence where Rose and her

daughter's were held captive. We were certain that time of the essence in this case so that evidence wasn't destroyed recovery and the suspects didn't flee.

Quote from an Investigator's report:

"During the interview, the 5 yo, provided details on the incident, including details on the house in Milwaukee where they were held. These details would later become important in identifying the location where the mother and her children were held."

During Daisy's forensic interview she told Jensen that guys came running up to her mom and sister and told them to "get in the car." Daisy was able to give very detailed descriptions of each of the suspects, right down to one of them having "skin like hers" which appeared to be Hispanic, or light skinned black male and wearing a black sweater.

Daisy told Jensen that the guys were saying bad words to her mom and that her mom just kept crying. Daisy said the guys put them in someone's house and told them to sleep over. Jensen asked Daisy to tell her all about the house. Daisy told Jensen there was a dog, pictures and a plant next to the door inside the room.

Daisy told Jensen that the guy with the brown skin was talking to her mom about how to get the money and her mom kept saying to please not hurt them and she'll figure out a way to get it.

Jensen was then able to get Daisy to provide additional details about the house and basement where they were kept. Daisy stated there was a word drawn on one of the basement walls and a black and yellow chair. She also stated there was a lot of garbage on the floor and the guys gave them couch cushions to sleep on. Daisy also drew a picture of the house and told Jensen the outside was yellow in color. Later, when Investigators served a search warrant on the residence, all of those things were true.

The next morning, Daisy said she woke up to a happy meal and when they left the house again one of the guys put a black sweater over their mom's head and got back into mom's car. Daisy said her and her sister's heads were not covered up.

Daisy was also able to give a description of a tattoo on one of the male suspects, and when it was compared with the actual offender's tattoos Daisy's description was accurate.

After the search warrant was executed on the residence in Milwaukee, we saw everything Daisy described in her forensic interview. The words on the basement wall, the couch cushions on the floor, the bucket they used as their bathroom and the Happy Meals they had for breakfast. Everything was coming together for this case and multiple arrests were made as a result. The three main suspects are now serving lengthy prison sentences.

I can tell you from the bottom of my heart that I've worked over 1000 crimes against child cases in my 12 years at the Racine Police Department and the fact that we are blessed to have a Child

Advocacy Center in our jurisdiction is instrumental in so many of those having positive outcomes. Thank you for your time and attention today.

Written Testimony: (Please note that for the purposes of time, I have submitted written and verbal testimony.)

My name is Isabel Williston. I go by she/her/ella pronouns.

At the age of 14, the man that I trusted as my caretaker while my parents were away crawled into bed with me. At the time, I never made a report because I was told by a school counselor that I was “never penetrated so nothing can be done.”

At the age of 15, I engaged in a relationship with 24-year-old man. At the time, I thought that he was the first person that understood my life and what I had experienced. I now see that I was groomed, taken advantage of, assaulted, and left to blame myself because after all one might argue I was a willing participant.

At the age of 21, my employer put his hands around my neck. While making a police report, I was asked “are you sure you want to go through with this because he is a smart and powerful businessman who has money for an attorney?”

For years, I endured silent suffering, subjected to blame, hushing, and unwarranted questioning. There were instances when I internalized the belief that I was solely responsible. At 14, I questioned myself for forgetting to lock my bedroom door. At 15, I wondered if I should have known better. By 21, I found myself questioning the necessity of that third job. It took me considerable time to recognize that the blame was not mine to bear.

In the aftermath, I dedicated years to processing and healing, a journey made possible by the invaluable support of victim service providers. It's crucial to acknowledge that my healing journey remains ongoing, a continuous process that I am navigating with resilience and determination.

My lived experience is not widely known, and today, I deliberated whether to open up about it. It might have been simpler to start by sharing my professional background, yet the personal impact is significant, and I want to emphasize that I am not alone in this. In Wisconsin, 1 in 5 women have experience rape in their lifetime, and 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced contact sexual violence. In 2022, 96 individuals dies in Wisconsin due to Domestic Violence at an alarming rate of approximately 1 death every 3.8 days.

The reported numbers might be alarming, but what's even more unsettling is that these are just the cases that have been brought to light. Many individuals suffer in silence, perhaps silenced, as I once was.

Embarking on my path to healing, I encountered ASTOP, a sexual abuse center that serves Fond du Lac, Green Lake, and, at that time, Waushara Counties. ASTOP's mission revolves around empowering survivors, prioritizing the healing process, and breaking the cycle of sexual violence. Discovering ASTOP ignited a profound passion within me for advocating change and supporting healing services.

The realization that my experiences resonated with others fueled my determination to make a meaningful impact. Motivated by this awareness, I wholeheartedly immersed myself in volunteering for ASTOP Sexual Abuse Center, channeling my time and efforts toward contributing to their mission of supporting survivors. As my involvement deepened, my passion for advocating change and supporting survivors propelled me into the pivotal role of ASTOP's Executive Director.

Expressing the profound impact of my last nine months as Executive Director is a challenging task. During this period, I've had the privilege of working alongside exceptionally empathetic, compassionate, and inspiring advocates. Their dedication knows no bounds, as they respond tirelessly, 24/7, demonstrating a commitment that goes beyond the ordinary.

These advocates exemplify unwavering support, even to the extent of canceling personal time off when a long-awaited jury trial date is set. Their primary focus is on standing by survivors until justice is served. Whether it's driving for hours to attend a status hearing or coordinating with local resources to ensure all the survivor's needs are met, these advocates go above and beyond.

What sets them apart is not just their affiliation with ASTOP; it extends statewide. Despite working for different organizations with diverse missions, we share a common goal: aiding survivors on their healing journey. The unity among these advocates transcends organizational boundaries, reinforcing our collective commitment to supporting survivors throughout their path to healing.

I cannot speak for the impacts felt by agencies across the state, but I can elaborate on the specific repercussions experienced by ASTOP. The reduction in VOCA funding has led to a staggering 71% loss in our annual budget, equivalent to \$432,000. Although ASTOP currently has this funding, uncertainties loom, particularly after October 1, 2024. This uncertainty has already resulted in the departure of three advocates who, while deeply passionate about their work, must also secure their livelihoods.

The repercussions of this nine-month uncertainty manifested sooner than anticipated. ASTOP is currently only able to fill two out of the three vacant positions, leading to staffing cuts. Consequently, this has resulted in a reduction of services impacting case management, support groups, prevention education, outreach, and our 24/7 crisis and advocacy hotline. Moreover, ASTOP is grappling with resource constraints, having to forgo the printing of essential materials such as brochures, pamphlets, business cards, and prevention education lesson booklets that reached over 12,000 individuals in 2023. Lastly, had to eliminate transportation assistance, thus creating a barrier to accessibility to services.

The ramifications extend beyond immediate service reduction. The diminished level of prevention education and outreach activities poses threats to ASTOP's reputation and credibility. Long-term sustainability concerns also loom large, adding to the challenges faced by the organization.

While sitting with the impacts of this funding, I took a moment to ask the survivors we serve about their experience. One said "I was at a point in my life where I was hopelessly living in silence. Advocate coming to the psych ward saved my life and helped me feel heard and they convinced me that I was not to blame and this can happen to anyone. No one is smarter than the grooming process and ASTOP has been providing services since 2017." Another said "ASTOP is committed to continuing to serve survivors and their loved ones while continuing to advocate for change. My confidence has changed so much I now stand a whole in taller. I want to emphasize the critical importance of funding for all victim services."

Another survivor wrote a 2 page back and front written letter about how ASTOP has supported her. While I wish I could stand here and read this full letter, I leave you with just a few statements. "We need a place where people can go and receive counseling and treatment. Not only for the victims but also for their families. When abuse happens, it effects so many close to the victim. We need a place where victims can go and feel safe and protected... We need a place for them, where they can be heard and supported. We need to keep educating people on what happens after the abuse. We also need to educate people how to protect themselves. To know what is ok and what is not ok. Together as a community we can help each other, we need to stick together and let people know that they are important and that there is help for them. They matter and others care."

I may be the one in front of you today, but I know that countless survivors would stand with me if they could. We need your help now more than ever.

I stand before you not only as a survivor but also as an advocate and the Executive Director of ASTOP, urging you to lend your support and advocacy for the passage of AB 940. The implications of this funding extend far beyond individual stories; they are integral to the well-being of countless individuals in Wisconsin.

AB 940 holds the key to addressing critical needs that, without proper funding, will undoubtedly result in significant and far-reaching consequences for our state. The allocation of resources is paramount in sustaining the vital services and support systems that survivors rely on for healing and empowerment.

Your agreement and advocacy for AB 940 are essential steps toward ensuring that Wisconsin can effectively combat the impacts of sexual violence, support survivors, and foster a community dedicated to breaking the cycle of abuse. This legislation is not just a matter of policy; it is a beacon of hope for those who have experienced trauma and a commitment to building a safer and more resilient future for our state.

Verbal Testimony:

Thank you to all the members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

I am Isabel Williston, the Executive Director of ASTOP Sexual Abuse Center, and I am honored to address you today. I appreciate this opportunity to share the profound impact of Assembly Bill 940 (AB 940) on our organization and the countless survivors in Wisconsin.

At ASTOP, our mission is to empower survivors, prioritize healing, and disrupt the cycle of sexual violence, through our free, confidential and uncapped services of treatment, advocacy, and prevention.

In my role as Executive Director, I have had the privilege of working alongside dedicated advocates at ASTOP. They tirelessly respond to the needs of survivors with empathy and compassion, serving as the backbone of our organization. However, the challenges we face due to the reduction in Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding put our essential services at risk.

The reported statistics on sexual abuse are alarming, but the unreported cases leave individuals suffering in silence. Due to VOCA reductions, ASTOP faces a potential 71% loss in our annual budget, equivalent to \$432,000. As anyone could conclude, this poses a severe threat to our ability to provide crucial services. Despite the current funding, the looming uncertainty after October 1, 2024, has already led to the voluntary departure of three advocates, impacting our services significantly.

This funding uncertainty has manifested in staffing losses, affecting case management, support groups, prevention education, outreach, and our 24/7 crisis and advocacy hotline. Resource constraints forced us to forgo printing essential materials, hindering outreach efforts and eliminating transportation assistance, creating barriers to accessibility.

I stand before you not just as an Executive Director but also as a survivor and advocate, urging your support for AB 940. Handwritten letters from survivors accompany my testimony, emphasizing the urgent need for your assistance. The implications of this legislation extend far beyond individual stories; they are integral to the well-being of countless individuals in Wisconsin.

ASTOP has been a lifeline for Fond du Lac and Green Lake counties, providing personal, medical, and legal advocacy for 293 survivors in 2023. In 2023, our two licensed professional therapists offered 1204 trauma counseling sessions, and our staff and volunteers responded to 70 Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) exams. Additionally, we conducted prevention education for 10,000 individuals.

Now, facing the impact of the funding decrease, ASTOP is just one of over a hundred organizations affected. The pending reduction in VOCA funding jeopardizes the critical services we provide to our community. Your support and advocacy for AB 940 are essential steps

towards ensuring Wisconsin effectively combats the impacts of violence, supports survivors, and breaks the cycle of abuse.

The survivors we serve, along with countless others, stand with us in urging you to lend your support for the passage of AB 940. This legislation is not just a matter of funding; it is a beacon of hope for those who have experienced trauma and a commitment to building a safer and more resilient future for our state.

Thank you.

To whom it may Concern:

1-22-24

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I would like to share why I feel ASTOP is needed, and a huge part of our community. It helps so many people that wouldn't be able to get treatment and or get treatment in a timely manner. We all know these days that it takes months to get into a counselor or a therapist. When you have this kind of trauma that is crucial time. Plus those moments of panic and needing to speak with someone can happen at any time of day.

ASTOP has their hotline available 24 hours, that is so helpful to so many.

Unfortunately, this kind of abuse happens way more than people ~~think~~ are aware of. Not only to children but also to adults.

We need a place where people can go and receive counseling and treatment. Not only for the victims but also for their families. When abuse happens, it effects so many close to the victims. We need a place where victims can go and feel safe and protected. Where people care and are willing to help. Everyone doesn't have insurance or funds to be able to

receive the treatment that they need and deserve.

Speaking from personal experience, my abuse started at a very young age. It was from someone who should have protected me, not abused me. But instead, he threatened me. If I ever told he would kill my brothers in front of me, my mom, and then he would kill me.

The abuse went on for years, I didn't say anything until right after I turned 17 years old, I was so scared but I felt I would rather be killed than to be keep being abused.

It has been 34 years since I was able to get away from the abuse. It has been a very healing process; it definitely hasn't been an easy one. Not only for myself for my relationships, learning to trust again was very hard. Plus having a healthy sexual relationship doesn't come easy for survivors.

I'm thankful I didn't turn to drugs or alcohol to numb my pain. But I know other survivors who have. They have turned into addicts, and some have lost their lives from trying to numb the pain. Because

they weren't receiving the help they need. Talking with someone who is a neutral person and can help teach you coping skills would ~~be~~ help so many who suffer from these tragic situations. Plus, this would help our community, it wouldn't overload other resources, like suicidal calls, ER visits, etc.

When you go through these experiences you have triggers after your trauma. Triggers can happen at any time and any place. Getting back control of the situation can take anywhere from minutes to days. This can happen from seeing someone who resembles your abuser, certain noises, sounds or songs, and smells that take you back to when and where you were abused.


Many things that are normal day experiences for someone who hasn't been abused, can throw a survivor into a tailspin. Having the proper help for these victims will help our community in many ways.

We need a place where victims can go or call, and feel safe and not judged. Where their families and spouses can go and ask questions

Do they will understand what their loved ones is going through and how they can help support them. A STOP helps with these needs. Everyone doesn't have a support ~~system~~ systems or friends that they can talk to and trust. We need a place for them, where they can be heard and supported.

We need to keep educating people on what happens after the abuse. We also need to educate people how to protect themselves, to know what is ok and what is NOT ok. People need to know how to protect their children and signs to watch for. People also need to know that you can't trust everyone, even if they are family or close friends. Abusers are everywhere and are usually the ones who are suppose to be protecting our children. Most abusers groom the child, then it is much easier for them to abuse when they are trusted. We need to teach people what to watch for, and what questions to ask and how to help.

Together as a community we can help each other, we need to stick together and let people know that they are important and that there is help for them. They matter, and others care.

Sincerely, Nelson 



Striving To End the Cycle of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Trafficking

Listen. Support. Transform Lives.

THE WOMEN'S COMMUNITY
A SAFE PLACE: SERVICES FOR
VICTIMS OF ALL GENDERS & AGES



February 6, 2024

Dear Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

The impact that support and funding in AB 940 will have on domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy services and the victims affected by these life-altering traumas cannot be understated. Unfortunately, our state is not unique in the devastating effects of domestic violence and sexual assault. In 2022 alone, there were 96 deaths related to domestic violence; meaning that one out of every six domestic violence homicides in the United States was here in Wisconsin. Advocates across the state work tirelessly to ensure that victims of domestic and sexual violence have the life-saving support and resources they need to stay safe and heal from trauma. Financial support from our Legislature allows for services to continue while sending a clear message that intimate partner violence is unacceptable.

The Victims of Crime act and other state grant sources have consistently provided funding for advocacy services, but providers across the state will be facing devastating cuts coming in October of 2024. VOCA funding allows advocates to accompany victims through emotional, complicated and traumatizing court processes. Recently, an advocate was able to provide support and help the surviving family of a homicide victim through the week long trial that recounted a horrible pattern of abuse and gruesome murder. The advocate not only answered questions about the proceedings, but was the grounding presence the family could lean on when evidence was overwhelming.

The anticipated 70% reduction in VOCA awards would make it impossible to maintain current levels of support staff and affect our ability to offer client-centered, trauma-informed, personal and life-saving support that all victims deserve. Our dedicated advocates are navigating safety plans, community resources, criminal and civil court, mental health, housing, education, and medical care with clients; still participating in community continuum of care collaborations to ensure best practice in meeting needs. The annual estimated cost of domestic violence in Wisconsin is \$657 million, and without adequate funding of support services we can only assume that cost will rise considerably.

Daily, I bear witness to the direct impact funding has on victims in our Emergency Shelter Program. Victims fleeing violence come to our door seeking refuge, and advocates are able to support their healing, growth, and strength. Thank you for your consideration and continued support of domestic and sexual violence victims and the advocates who strive to help them build safe and productive lives free of fear in all of our communities.

Sincerely,

Shannon Jarecki
Domestic Abuse Program Coordinator

Good afternoon committee members.

Thank you for your bravery and action in supporting this effort to coauthor/cosponsor legislation that will increase funding for sexual assault and domestic violence services across the State of Wisconsin.

I am representing the Violence Intervention Project which is in rural Kewaunee County, WI. Our organization has been providing domestic violence, sexual assault services since 1989. These services began with a group of volunteers because of a domestic violence homicide. Our community has been fortunate to have experienced only two other domestic violence homicides which is too many. They occurred five months apart in 2019 and during the Stay-at-Home order in 2020.

Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault programs have displayed resiliency from the beginning of our grassroots endeavors. I have witnessed the strength of programs surviving the pandemic while always serving, making sure victims' safety was always at the forefront of our thoughts with the additional barriers of isolation. Many programs struggled during COVID financially due to the inability to navigate fundraising activities. Some programs were the recipients of COVID supplemental funds which have now been exhausted. Now programs must attend to the next budget crisis.

The Department of Children and Families restructured the grant funding process for 2022 by making it a competitive process. The Violence Intervention Project did receive funding but at a decrease from years prior in the amount of \$30,505. We are not alone in this decrease. Programs now need to focus on navigating the VOCA decrease to victim service programs in Wisconsin. For our organization this could potentially be another loss of \$472,477. These funds are simply not obtainable to make up in fundraising activities and donation requests in our small rural community.

We as victim programs have always carried the burden of how we will meet our annual budgets. We now need others to help carry this burden of making sure individuals/families in Wisconsin have access to competent services that they deserve following a victimization. We need to remember that victims are not asking for crimes to be committed against them, these are involuntary crimes of the most intimate nature being perpetrated against them.

The VOCA funding announcement in 2019 encouraged programs to increase staff wages. A resource was provided to guide programs on the increase by the Governor's Council on Domestic Abuse: Operating a Domestic Abuse Program a Fair Minimum document. VOCA Funds made it possible for victim service programs to finally be a bit competitive and equitable in wages. Once again, COVID happened, and the labor market became more competitive which has made it difficult again to retain/recruit employees.

Advocacy work is difficult. Advocates listen to the most intimate of traumas, hold individuals' hands during sexual assault examinations, witness bruising on humans and console family

members who have lost a loved one due to domestic violence. Advocates in our small rural community often have personal safety concerns due to the type of work that we do.

Advocates provided a total of 12,772 individual advocacy services with VOCA funding. From 2019 to 2021 we experienced an increase in individual services by an alarming 76%.

VOCA funds have not only allowed us to increase wages to a fair minimum wage but has made it possible to provide employees with access to an Employee Assistance Program. This can reduce the impact of Secondary Trauma that can occur over time as a victim service provider.

The ratio of the population to Mental Health Providers In Kewaunee County is 2,260:1. The current wait list for mental health services provided by Kewaunee County Department of Human Services is an average of 3-6 months. VOCA funds filled this gap for individuals/families and made it a priority for victims of all ages to have immediate access to mental health services. These funds also allowed victims the confidentiality they sometimes need to access services without having to file insurance claims, which in relationships in which there is power, and control could also impact safety. This funding is necessary for many victims to address the emotional and psychological needs following victimization. Children who have experienced sexual assault can't put their trauma on a waitlist. The lack of VOCA funds alongside the lack of service providers in rural Kewaunee County may cause victims to have to seek mental health services in surrounding communities, creating additional burdens such as financial, time and transportation. These therapy services began being provided in October of 2019. It can take a bit for new programs to become successful. Amid COVID we were able to provide 814 therapy services, in 2021 1,002 sessions and 2022, 911. In 2023, we experienced a decrease, not because of need but because of a separation in partnership, still providing a total of 342 therapy services. Without VOCA funding these individuals would have to travel outside of Kewaunee County for therapy services while still navigating a wait time, for some individuals determine where the money for the additional fuel expense is going to come from or go without access.

Our community is thriving in agriculture, which does bring many immigrants to Kewaunee County. There are many elements of power and control that become prominent, especially living in a rural environment. Isolation is an ever-present barrier for victims residing in Kewaunee County due to the lack of public transportation, limited affordable housing options and minimal employment opportunities. These barriers to one's freedoms compounded by the linguistic and immigration barriers that underserved populations face only serve to further alienate victims.

Throughout the action of a sexual assault, one's voice is silenced. Imagine being in an environment where something so violent and intimate is taken from you or a child and your ability to communicate effectively is non-existent. The shame and guilt that follow the assault keeps one silenced for the fear of being made to leave the country you call home, maybe even separating you from your children due to documentation status. If the perpetrator of the sexual assault is an intimate partner, how will you make ends meet, where will you find employment, who will watch your children, where will you live, how will you find diapers for your baby and

how will you stay safe. Not only do you feel isolated and alone because of living in a predominantly white community, if you report, you may be ostracized among the people of your own culture due to the structure of unity within the Latinx community.

The Violence Intervention Project has made it a priority to provide linguistic and culturally competent services to individuals within the Latinx community. VOCA funds support two bilingual positions that can assist in the elimination of language and cultural barriers. The Violence Intervention Project is the only service provider in Kewaunee County that has Spanish speaking in-person services.

VOCA funds support advocate positions that provide services to children and youth. Advocates have established relationships with schools to be able to provide individual and support group services in schools settings during free periods and lunch breaks. This increases youths access to services eliminating barriers of parental schedules and after school activities. Last year advocates provided services to 86 youth independent of parents seeking services.

The Violence Intervention Project does not have an emergency shelter like there is in many communities. Our organization utilizes hotels for short-term solutions, however there are many limitations to a brief hotel stay. Organizationally, we utilize VOCA funds to assist with the hotel stays. The Violence Intervention Project does have a Transitional Living Facility that provides services to individuals and families at risk of becoming homeless due to domestic violence or sexual assault. This program is a goal-oriented program that assists victims in transitioning to independent living and self-sufficiency. This program can provide housing for up to nine individuals. The Transitional Living Program Coordinator is VOCA funded as well as some of the expenses to offset the cost of the program.

In 1988, as a 14-year-old child I was raped by a friend's father. There were not advocacy services in every community, such as the community I lived in at the time. The community that I was raped in had services but unfortunately, I was ineligible for services because of county boundaries. Thankfully my parents had the resources to be able to provide me with the help that I needed to overcome the trauma that I experienced. Healing should not be based on privilege.

The absence of VOCA funding is going to be devastating to our communities, our families, our State and our Nation. There are going to be children and families that don't have access to programs within their own communities. There is going to be programs that don't have the capacity or staff to serve. There is going to be advocates that suffer from fatigue and burnout. There are going to be communities without programs. The absence of VOCA funding is going to revert progress that has been achieved back to where we were 35 years ago.

These are OUR people in the State of Wisconsin that need your assistance to overcome and thrive following victimizations of intimate crimes. Thank you for your attention and action to address this devastating reduction.

Submitted by Laura Giddley 02/08/2024



Formerly known as Manitowoc County Domestic Violence Center
SUPPORTING VICTIMS of DOMESTIC ABUSE and SEXUAL ASSAULT

To: Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee
Date: February 7, 2024
From: Sara Meier, Executive Director
Re: AB 940

My name is Sara Meier. I am the Executive Director at InCourage in Manitowoc, WI. InCourage provides services to victims of domestic violence and sexual violence in Manitowoc County. The prevalence of sexual violence and domestic violence in Wisconsin is significant. In Wisconsin, 1 in 4 women have experienced rape in their lifetime and 1 in 2 women have experienced contact sexual violence. One in 4 men have experienced contact sexual violence. In 2022, someone in Wisconsin died every 3.8 days as a result of domestic violence, which totals 96 people. One in 6 domestic violence homicides in the U.S. happens in Wisconsin.

In 2023, InCourage served 300 victims of domestic and sexual violence. InCourage operates a crisis line and a shelter that is staffed 24 hours a day. We offer safety planning, crisis intervention, community service referrals, support groups, advocacy, accompaniment to forensic interviews and exams, accompaniment to court dates, supportive counseling, and legal advocacy. We also offer case management for individuals in shelter. InCourage provides education in our community about domestic and sexual violence. We are seeing increases in requests to accompany victims to the Child Advocacy Center for forensic interviews (which require 1-2 hour round-trip travel) and in requests from local Emergency Departments at hospitals to accompany victims for forensic exams. We are seeing an increase in requests for shelter and there's not enough affordable housing so victims stay in shelter longer. InCourage provided almost 9,000 nights of shelter in 2023. Victims have fewer resources so they need more from our staff and program.

The Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds victim service providers across Wisconsin so we can provide victims with services such as safety planning, crisis intervention, community service referrals, support groups, advocacy, accompaniment to forensic interviews and exams, accompaniment to court dates, and legal advocacy.

Currently, the DOJ awards \$44.5 million per year. Starting in 10/2024, the DOJ will only be able to award \$13 million per year. That is a 70% reduction in funds that DOJ can award beginning this October. That is a huge decrease. Quite frankly, even if InCourage receives the same amount of VOCA funding we've been receiving for the last several years, *it is not enough*.

The Sexual Assault Victim Services (SAVS) Grant Program, which is also administered by the DOJ, is the only state program that funds sexual violence prevention and direct services for survivors and their families. The amount of SAVS funding InCourage receives pays for 50% of 1 staff member who works with victims of sexual violence. That's only ½ of their wage and benefits. That's it. *It is not enough*.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the only state program that funds domestic violence services and prevention. One of the services it funds in part is shelter, but *it is not enough*.

300 E. Reed Ave. • Manitowoc, WI 54220-4951 • 920-684-4661 • Fax: 920-684-6344 • Crisis: 920-684-5770 • www.incouragewi.org

Mission Statement: To provide shelter, crisis intervention, and supportive services for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse and their families, with a commitment to safety, respect and promoting self-determination.



Formerly known as Manitowoc County Domestic Violence Center
SUPPORTING VICTIMS of DOMESTIC ABUSE and SEXUAL ASSAULT

Even at the current funding levels, SAVS and DV services funding do not meet the needs of survivors in Wisconsin. It is time for Wisconsin to step up and invest in sexual and domestic violence services and prevention.

At InCourage, if funding does not increase, we will have to reduce staff, which means victims may have to wait longer to meet with staff, or worse yet, some victims may not receive services which is tragic. InCourage already has a small staff of 20 people, which includes the Advocates who staff the shelter 24 hours a day. Staff who remain will have more work to do, and we may have to make very difficult decisions about which services we can continue to provide. There will not be fewer victims who rely on InCourage.

An increase in funding would allow us to focus on serving victims/survivors without worrying about where half of our annual budget is coming from. We would be able to do more outreach to victims so more people who need services get them. We could place some focus on prevention of sexual and domestic violence and have a chance at reducing the number of people who end up being victims. We could do better work because, with more funding, our staff would not be stretched to the max. Victims/survivors would receive more of the help they so desperately need if InCourage receives more funding.

I am asking you to vote yes on AB940 to increase funding for sexual assault, domestic violence and child advocacy services.

I appreciate your consideration of AB940. If you have questions, I can be contacted at 920-684-4661 or sara.meier@incouragewi.org

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February 06, 2024

Dear Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

Please accept this letter as my written testimony regarding the VOCA (Victims Of Crime Act) Funding Bill (AB 940) and the impact the impending cuts to VOCA expected for October 1, 2024 will have on our program, clients, staff, and community. I am the Program Manager for Family Services of NE Wisconsin-Sexual Assault Center program, and the Sexual Assault Center (SAC) located in Brown County has been in place since 1974 supporting victims of sexual violence and their families for 50 years as of this April 2024. The Sexual Assault Center also serves three other counties: Door, Oconto, and Marinette. In 2023, the Sexual Assault Center, with a staff of 12, served 1325 clients across the four-county service area.

The Sexual Assault Center is a 24/7 crisis response program to provide services and on-going support to victims and their families through hotline and in-person response. These services are necessary for victims and their families to find healing and support while navigating the multiple systems involved in reporting crimes of sexual violence. Research shows survivors working with advocates: have higher rates of reporting to law enforcement; are more likely to utilize healthcare services; and are less likely to be retraumatized when supported by an advocate, especially during crisis encounters. These facts support the vital role advocates play, as these positive effects and outcomes are felt by the survivors, and by extension, the community.

Advocates provided victim advocacy services directly to victims and their loved ones but advocates also work alongside many community partners from a multidisciplinary team of professionals dedicated to supporting survivors of sexual violence and holding their offenders accountable. Some key community partners include the SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Exam) Supervisor, Dana Stueber, from St. Vincent Hospital's SANE program and Brown County District Attorney David Lasee. Both Dana and David, have offered their support of the Sexual Assault Center and the services provided:

"As a SANE program, it is our protocol to have an advocate present... Doing this brings comfort, reassurance, and knowledge of resources to our patients. My contact with my patients is very short. It is the advocates from the Sexual Assault Center that are there from the beginning, all the way through the court process..."--Dana Stueber RN, BSN, SANE-A, SANE-P

"Without the aid of the Sexual Assault Center staff working diligently and devotedly with victims, we can say without a doubt that there would be less offenders held accountable for their illegal behaviors, which ultimately endangers the community."--Brown County District Attorney David Lasee

The Sexual Assault Center (SAC) and its advocacy services are funded, in large part, by grants. Currently, the Sexual Assault Center has approximately a \$1.2M annual budget (25% fundraised & 75% grants). The



Family Services

300 Crooks Street, P.O. Box 22308, Green Bay, WI 54305-2308, (920) 436-6800
1810 Appleton Road, Menasha, WI 54952, (920) 739-4226
36 Broad Street, Ste 150, Oshkosh, WI 54901, (920) 233-6630
57 N 12th Avenue, Ste 110, P.O. Box 34, Sturgeon Bay, WI 54235-0034, (920) 746-9040

Victims of Crime Act grant (VOCA) is a major source of that grant funding making up 46% of that 75%. However, that source of funding has taken a devastating cut. There will be a 70% reduction in the amount the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) will be awarding for VOCA, beginning in October 2024, and the new competitive grant cycle will only allow grantees to apply for up to \$250,000. To put that into perspective, currently our agency receives \$795,000 from VOCA. The Sexual Assault Center hopes for the 2024-2025 budget to look like: 50% fundraised & 50% grants; however, with this significant shift in one fiscal year, the Sexual Assault Center must be prepared for 2024-2025 budget to look like: 71% fundraised & 29% grants. The Sexual Assault Victim Services (SAVS) Grant Program, administered by the DOJ, is the only state program that funds sexual violence prevention initiatives and direct services for survivors and their families. Even at existing levels, SAVS and VOCA funding does not meet the needs of survivors in Wisconsin. With the expected reductions in VOCA funding, now is the time for Wisconsin to make an investment in sexual and domestic violence services and prevention.

Thank you for your time and support of the VOCA Funding Bill (AB 940).

Sincerely,

Jamie Craig
Program Manager
Family Services of NE Wisconsin—Sexual Assault Center
24/7 Hotline: 920.436.8899

Dear Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

New Horizons Shelter and Outreach Centers has been providing safety and services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault to La Crosse County Residents since 1978 and to Trempealeau County Residents since 1987.

Annually we provide safety and services to over 600 victims; answer over 3,300 calls to our crisis line; and shelter over 250 women, men, and children for more than 13,500 nights.

In the last 10 years, La Crosse County has lost 9 lives to domestic violence.

Unfortunately, we are seeing a spike in stalking, strangulation, sex trafficking and homelessness due to domestic violence in both counties.

We yearn for no cuts in VOCA funding, hope for the minimal cut of \$178,000 but ultimately, know we need to prepare for the entire cut of \$428,261 in funding.

The minimal cut means a reduction in advocates from four in La Crosse County to two and from two advocates in Trempealeau County to one. The reduction means less victims served, less education for the public, burned-out advocates, and increased staff turnover.

The entire loss of funding means we keep the shelter open (it is 90% funded by the Department of Children and Families) and the crisis line running for as long as we can. Yet all ages of victims residing in the shelter and victims in the community will not have advocates to assist them with empowerment skills, legal advocacy, safety planning, support groups, employment and housing assistance, resources and referrals, medical advocacy, or personal advocacy.

Please help us save lives. Please vote yes on AB940 to increase funding for sexual assault, domestic violence, and child advocacy services.

Sincerely,

Ann Kappauf

Executive Director of New Horizons Shelter & Outreach Centers, Inc

To: Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee

From: Angela Mancuso, Executive Director, The Women's Center

RE: AB 940

Date: February 6, 2024

The Women's Center, founded in 1977, is the only organization in Waukesha County that provides prevention and intervention services to survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, human trafficking, and child abuse. We operate the only low barrier emergency shelter for survivors in Waukesha, and we provide a 24-Hour Hotline, the only transitional living units, individual advocacy, support groups, job readiness training, life skills development, 24/7 SANE responses, free onsite childcare, and violence prevention initiatives in schools.

We conservatively anticipate funding cuts of, at minimum, \$157,000 from VOCA and DCF in the upcoming year. The funding supports nineteen experienced advocates. Funding cuts this significant will impact those positions as we will be forced to cut hours and/or eliminate the positions. Less advocates means less service capacity which leads to victims remaining trapped in highly dangerous situations. The ripple effect to take into consideration is that the criminal justice system relies on service providers such as The Women's Center and similar agencies across the state. Our District Attorney's office relies on us to provide expert testimony for rape, child abuse and domestic violence cases which supports and substantiate prosecutorial argument and we provide advocates to do court accompaniment. Many victims have shared that they would not have participated with prosecution if it were not for The Women's Center. Our court accompaniment programming also furthers prosecution's arguments. The stronger the prosecution, the more perpetrators are held accountable, which leads to healthier, safer communities.

We also expect that we will have reduced capacity to help individuals and families with their financial needs. We have operated a flexible Client Resource Fund that allows us to provide financial support to survivors for legal fees, medical bills and medications, basic needs assistance, rent and moving fees, transportation, security improvements to their homes, and much more. This fund is the only one of its kind in Waukesha County. Because of the projected VOCA cuts, we expect that our ability to provide financial assistance will be substantially reduced in FY25, especially for legal fees. As attorney costs continue to rise and pro bono services have become more difficult to access, this may leave victims with very few if any options for legal representation. Many survivors depend on representation to feel safe pursuing legal options to protect themselves. Our clients have repeatedly told us that without our financial support, they never would been able to retain an attorney that gave them the safety and confidence to pursue a restraining order, to testify in criminal court, or to fight for custody to protect their child from continued abuse.

We anticipate that as other agencies face funding cuts and are forced to reduce or eliminate their programs, we will see a dramatic increase in requests for assistance that we will be unable to meet. Even if we could find outside funding to cover this deficit, we would still anticipate long-term impacts from these funding reductions on other programs if they cannot fundraise to cover their funding cuts. We have a partnership with Legal Action of Wisconsin, who provides no-cost representation to survivors during restraining order hearings, and we are deeply concerned for the future of their programming given funding cuts.

From 2019 - 2023, we have responded to 34,966 calls to our Hotline; sheltered 1,024 adults and their children, which further equates to 36,135 nights of care and 108,405 meals; we responded to 101 rape crisis response calls from area hospitals, and provided 1:1 advocacy, support, and resources to just over 2000 adults who were trafficked, deemed at high risk of being killed by their abuser, and/or sexually assaulted. And this is but a fraction of our services that we have been able to provide because of the levels of funding from VOCA. Based on the year over year increase in lethality assessments in Waukesha County that have resulted in 68% of victims being at high risk of being killed

Waukesha County has experienced two of the state's most traumatic mass killings connected to domestic violence - the Azana Salon & Spa where an abuser killed several co-workers and his wife; and the Waukesha Christmas Parade where an abuser who had abused and trafficked his victim across several states, drove through the parade after assaulting his victim, killing children and seniors, and harming dozens. The Women's Center provided support and resources for both horrifying incidents. Taking away key support systems for this state's most vulnerable is a death sentence for thousands of Wisconsin citizens.



JENNIFER M. PAINE TESTIMONY SUMMARY

You don't understand - My dad sold me. I have been going from place to place my whole life. This statement could have been from the old slavery era. But it is not. It is from a client in 2023, sitting in an office with Gwen and me, describing how she ended up at our shelter. Exhausted. Broken. And looking for help. I will call her Lynn to protect her confidentiality. Lynn sat with us holding a plate of chicken she managed to find at a donation table outside, shifting from side to side to relieve the pain in her legs from injuries she sustained being brutally raped on a car a few days prior. She described, in detail, being sold by her father, a notorious pimp in Chicago, to her uncle, just barely a teenager, and spending 30 years of her life going up and down the I-94 corridor as a sex worker. She told us about her children and her grandchildren and losing contact with them. She told us about her goals to get stable housing. She told us about her inability to pay for basic medical care, her inability to find a therapist willing to work with her, her distrust of all men. I sat there stunned and searching for ways to help her. It was like something out of a movie.

Except - it was not. Lynn's story is not a one-off from a client with unique circumstances who happened to come to Horizons. For us, this is an every day, every single day of the year, client story. In the last week, we have had 3 calls from trafficked victims looking for help.

My name is Jennifer Paine. I am the executive director for Horizons. Prior to coming to Horizons, I sat on the board for IPV nonprofits in Michigan, and I litigated cases for free for IPV victims and their children. Horizons is the oldest IPV shelter and full services provider in Wisconsin. We have been doing this work since 1968 underground, by two women, and since 1976 as an incorporated nonprofit. We are always at capacity in our shelter - and we provide hotels for incoming clients and never turn them away. Our numbers have skyrocketed in the last year. And it keeps going.

Horizons' mission is to provide support, shelter, advocacy, education, training, and healing services to victims of sexual and domestic abuse, their families, their children (who are often primary or secondary victims), and the community. We envision communities fully engaged to provide safety and to give voice to all affected by domestic abuse and sexual assault, while creating the social change necessary to address its root causes. Our mission is achievable through survivor-centered work that includes strategic partnerships and collaboration. As advocates for social justice, we embrace the voices of

diverse communities. We will consider any non-violent strategy that is consistent with our mission to prevent and eliminate domestic abuse and sexual abuse.

Victims of domestic and sexual violence are often unfamiliar with advocacy services. Community-based advocates, such as those at Horizons, offer free and confidential supportive services. These include systems advocacy (assistance with the legal process, medical care, reporting to law enforcement), one-on-one advocacy, group support, crisis intervention, referrals to our 24/7 emergency shelter, and information and referrals to community resources. An advocate's role is to listen to victims, provide unbiased information and options about the different courses of action available, and to support the victim's choices. Participation in the criminal justice process, filing a law enforcement report, and/or leaving one's abuser is not required in order to access advocacy services.

Horizons also provides mental health treatment and social services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault and their families. This includes: accompaniment to medical appointments; free therapy; support groups; prevention courses, also known as batterer intervention classes; and coordination of benefits, such as food assistance.

Horizons continues to provide emergency shelter, its first service, and has expanded housing services to include transitional, subsidizing housing, hotel vouchers, and relocation assistance.

Horizons provides outreach and training to the community often. This includes trainings to law enforcement, hospitals, and other social service agencies; inservices and support groups to schools and churches; and outreach for events like Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Sexual Assault Awareness Month; Human Trafficking Awareness Month; and Teen Dating Awareness Month.

Nationwide and here in Wisconsin, rates of IPV overall are increasing. In 2023, our trafficked client number in particular went up by three times. Our overall client load increased by 38% --while our budget remained the same, and for 2024 is estimated to go down by 40.2%. More on that later.

The question is, WHY?

We know why traffickers traffic - bad people do bad things. A lot of times for money. Because they can. Spending time analyzing the *why* for traffickers is wasting time.

The focus needs to be on *what our community is not doing that facilitates trafficking*. This is what *Lynn* meant sitting in our office this year. While anyone can be victimized, from our experience on the frontlines as a shelter and victim services provider, there are common factors that make victims more likely to be trafficked. They are:

Lack of affordable housing

Lack of good wages

Lack of affordable childcare during normal work hours

Lack of affordable food

Lack of affordable medical care

Lack of therapy

Lack of affordable treatment for substance abuse, a co-occurring abuse tactic

As examples:

Housing: Between 2012 and 2023, the Wisconsin median home sale price jumped by more than 150%, according to a report from the University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Wages: Minimum wage has remained \$7.25/hour since 2018 according to the US Labor Law Center.

Childcare: According to a report by the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the average annual cost of Child Care for a 4-year-old in Milwaukee County is \$12,142, while the cost for an infant is \$16,236. Both are higher than the national average. A person making minimum wage fulltime makes less than the average cost of childcare.

Food: According to the USDA in October 2023, all food prices are predicted to increase 5.8 percent, with a prediction interval of 5.5 to 6.1 percent.

In other words, lacking the necessities of life makes victims more vulnerable to trafficking. And the lack of affordability necessities makes it even harder for them to get out.

The same is true for many IPV victims – they do not have the resources to get out of their abusive relationship, and agencies like ours are looking at budget cuts for those resources we do have.

The state is not properly funding these programs.

VOCA cuts are coming. We stand to lose, at a minimum, 40.2% at Horizons. And despite a surplus in our state budget of over \$4 billion, none of our requested increases in funding for IPV programs passed.

This means, the DOJ will only be able to award \$13 million per year beginning October 2024. This will be the next competitive VOCA cycle for programs. That will be a 3-year grant cycle.

Put into perspective:

- Currently, the DOJ awards \$44.5 million per year, spread amongst 135 agencies.
- That is a 70% reduction in the amount DOJ will be awarding for VOCA this fall.
- DOJ is expecting they will have to have a cap of \$250k on grant awards. Around half of all current VOCA recipients are above that cap amount of \$250k.
- The DOJ will fund 52 agencies across WI (as opposed to 135 currently).
- VOCA is formula-based funding, meaning we can't simply ask for more VOCA funding at the federal level.

As another example, earlier this year, the DOJ requested a modest increase from \$2 million to \$9 million for sexual assault victim services programming, SAVS, where most of the funding for trafficked victims comes. Governor Evers included an increase to \$7 million in his proposed budget. It did not pass. This means, we have \$2 million for the entire state's programming.

Put into perspective:

o SAVS is the only state program that funds sexual violence prevention initiatives and direct services for survivors and their families.

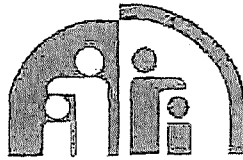
o SAVS is currently funded at \$2.235 million annually, DV services are currently funded at \$12.4 million annually. Those funding levels have been relatively static for the past decade.

o The static nature of funding has been a barrier to expanding culturally specific programs, who are providing services to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) survivors, often without adequate funding.

With the expected reductions in VOCA funding, now is the time for Wisconsin to make an investment in sexual and domestic violence services and prevention. Increases for both DV and SA funding were included in the Governors 23/25 executive budget. Unfortunately, those increases were removed in the final budget adopted by the legislature. Our ask: please, pass this bill.

It should surprise no one that clients like Lynn come to us exhausted. We are exhausted, too. And the clients will not stop coming. We need funding to help them.

If there is a single takeaway we want you to have today, it is this: if we do not properly fund programs to treat victims, we will fail them, and that burden will fall on the entire state. Please let us help victims like Lynn.



FAMILY SUPPORT
C E N T E R

Telephone: 715-723-1138
Toll-Free: 1-800-400-7020
Fax: 715-723-8460

P.O. Box 143
Chippewa Falls, WI 54729



To: Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee
Date: Feb. 7, 2024
From: Geri Segal, Executive Director
Re: Support of AB 940 (VOCA Funding Bill)

Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 940 (VOCA Funding Bill). My name is Geri Segal, Executive Director, representing the Family Support Center, a not for profit agency, providing services to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in Chippewa and Eau Claire Counties. In brief, we provide safety planning, legal advocacy, counseling, assistance in obtaining employment and accessing permanent housing and emergency shelter to survivors.

I am deeply grateful to the authors and co-sponsors of this bill. As you all know, sexual and domestic violence are significant problems in Wisconsin. 1 in 5 women have experienced rape in their lifetime, and in 2022, 96 individuals died in Wisconsin due to domestic violence at a rate of approximately one death in every 3.8 days. The annual economic cost of domestic violence in Wisconsin is estimated at \$657 million.

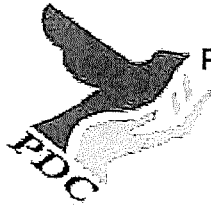
On the local level, our agency, the Family Support Center, provided services to 773 survivors of Domestic Violence in Chippewa County, and services to 522 survivors of sexual violence in Eau Claire and Chippewa Counties in 2023. Over 90% of the survivors we serve report that they are safer and more able to cope with the trauma they have experienced as a result of our services. National research confirms that agencies like ours save lives and help survivors in all aspects of their lives.

The 70% reduction in the amount DOJ will be awarding for VOCA beginning 10/1/2024 will have a catastrophic impact on our agency and survivors in Chippewa and Eau Claire County, as well as survivors throughout Wisconsin. The Family Support Center **will lose at least \$333,000 in VOCA funds.** We will have to lay off staff who provide services to survivors. This means that we will serve fewer survivors and provide fewer services. **Many survivors in Chippewa and Eau Claire Counties will be left without services and consequently survivors will be at risk.**

An increase in our funding, as proposed in Assembly Bill 940, will allow us to continue providing all our services to those who need them and continue special initiatives such as our Lethality Assessment Program and our rental assistance projects.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We appreciate the committee's thoughtful consideration, and we urge you to support this Bill.

Feel free to contact me at geri@fscf.org or 715-214-9878 with any questions.



Personal Development Center, Inc.
Domestic Abuse & Assault Services

To: Members of the Assembly Committee on
Criminal Justice and Public Safety
Date: February 8, 2024
From: Renee Schulz, Executive Director - Personal Development Center, Inc.
Re: Support of AB 940

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Assembly Bill 940. Personal Development Center, Inc. (PDC) is a non-profit victim service agency serving the greater Marshfield area (northern Wood and south western Marathon County) and Clark County for nearly 47 years. We are supportive of AB 940 and respectfully urge Committee members to approve its passage.

PDC provides comprehensive advocacy and support to victims of domestic/dating violence, sexual assault, harassment, stalking, and trafficking, as well as youth victims of child physical/ sexual abuse and/or witnesses to violence within their home. Based on recent service delivery data, approximately 750 victims/survivors receive comprehensive advocacy and support services through PDC each year.

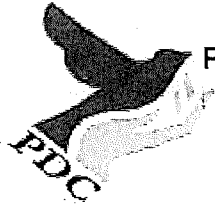
Victim service agencies across the state are facing significant challenges in meeting the influx in emergency services and transitional needs of victims/survivors, as well as sustaining necessary programs and services among an uncertain grant-funding climate. For those serving our rural communities, these challenges are compounded due to extreme isolation and severe lack of community resources to address identified needs.

For the first time in over 40 years, domestic abuse victim services funding through the state Department of Children and Families (DCF) has gone to a competitive grant process. State funding has been redistributed regionally to target urban, underserved communities; the northern region allocation has decreased significantly. As of January 1, 2025 PDC will experience a decrease of \$102,689 annually. In addition, federal pass-through funding through the Department of Justice (Victims of Crime Act funding) has also undergone significant cuts and has placed a cap on allocation amounts. Beginning October 1, 2024, PDC will experience a decrease of \$350,000 annually. With an annual reduction of over \$450,000 in revenue annually, sustainability of PDC services is in severe jeopardy.

To prepare for impending funding losses, PDC has completed a comprehensive evaluation of staffing patterns to determine where programming/service delivery can be streamlined to more efficiently utilize agency resources. We have made revisions to job descriptions to better align with staff strengths/skills/abilities while taking on additional responsibilities, and have eliminated several positions from our staffing structure. Although significant, these changes will not remedy the funding loss. Our priority remains the stabilization of current services to ensure sustainability of comprehensive safety and support for victims/survivors.

The financial consequences of abuse are considerable, not only to victims and their children, but to society as a whole. Individuals and businesses feel the impact in terms of higher health care and lost productivity costs. Our state and city governments see the costs in budgets for law enforcement, the

Personal Development Center, Inc. (PDC)
505 East Depot St., Marshfield, WI 54449
715-384-2971 Fax: 715-384-7826



Personal Development Center, Inc.
Domestic Abuse & Assault Services

courts, Medicaid, and human service agencies. Police response to domestic violence calls require a multiple officer response and require many hours of investigation, interviewing, jail transports and paperwork. Making an investment to assist victims and children yields enormous dividends in human and financial returns.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer testimony for this vital legislation. I appreciate the Committee's thoughtful consideration of the future of victim services in our state, and respectfully urge you to support this proposal. Please feel free to contact me at execdir@pdcmarshfield.org or (715) 384-2971 with any further questions or concerns.

Personal Development Center, Inc. (PDC)
505 East Depot St., Marshfield, WI 54449
715-384-2971 Fax: 715-384-7826



To: Members of the Assembly Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee
Date: February 4, 2024
From: Laci Pustina, Co-Executive Director
Re: Assembly Version of the Legislation (AB 940)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am Laci Pustina, Co-Executive Director at Hope House of South-Central Wisconsin. Hope House provides crisis intervention, shelter, victim advocacy, supportive counseling, referrals to community resources, and legal and medical advocacy to victims of domestic and sexual violence.

In 2023, we served over 1,500 individuals and provided over 40,000 victim advocacy support services to individuals who've been affected by domestic and sexual violence. We serve five counties throughout the state: Sauk, Columbia, Juneau, Marquette, and Adams counties. Our total service area covers 3,465 square miles.

All Wisconsin programs, including ours, face imminent and severe cuts. This jeopardizes our ability to sustain essential services, potentially forcing us to cut or eliminate some of the most vital programs in the state of Wisconsin. As the sole provider in all five counties, victims in our area would be without safety services, shelter, support, and community resources.

Last year, we provided shelter for over 140 families, handled over 5,000 crisis calls, and supported over 1,000 victims of sexual and domestic violence. Again, without necessary funds, these individuals will be left without shelter, safety, and support, in turn, incurring more significant costs in the long run.

Even without cuts, existing levels fall short of meeting victims' needs. With anticipated reductions in VOCA funding, Wisconsin must invest in sexual and domestic violence services and prevention. We urge you to cosponsor legislation for increased funding—\$14 million for FY23 and \$36 million for FY24. Without these funds many Wisconsinites and their families are going to die at the hands of their abusers. It's inevitable there will be more domestic violence homicides and loss of children in Wisconsin without these funds.

If you have any further inquiries, please contact me at lacip@hopehousescw.org. Your support is crucial in safeguarding the well-being of countless individuals and families in our community.

720 Ash Street/P.O. Box 557 | Baraboo, WI 53913
Business: (608) 356-9123 | Fax: (608) 360-9483 | Helpline: (800) 584-6790
www.HopeHouseSCW.org

To: Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Date: February 8, 2024

From: Shannon Barry, Executive Director

Re: AB 940

I am Shannon Barry and I have had the honor of serving as the Executive Director of DAIS (Domestic Abuse Intervention Services) for the last 17 years, though I have worked in the field of domestic violence for more than 25 years.

DAIS has been serving the Dane County community and beyond since 1977. Our mission is to empower those affected by domestic violence and advocate for social change through support, education, and outreach. Like many of the other domestic violence programs across the state, DAIS offers a myriad of crisis intervention services for victims and survivors of domestic violence and their children including a 24/7 Help Line, a 24/7 Text Line, Legal Advocacy Services, Case Management Services, Parent and Child Advocacy Services, and the **ONLY homicide prevention** shelter for victims of intimate partner violence in Dane County.

Dane County is growing at a pace beyond other parts of Wisconsin, and we have certainly seen that reflected in the numbers of victims and survivors reaching out to DAIS for help. We are facing many challenges to keep up with the growing needs of our growing community, particularly in the face of stagnant funding from the Department of Children and Families which has not increased in more than a decade, and now with the looming reductions in federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) dollars coming into the state of Wisconsin.

Between 2022 and 2023, the total number of contacts to our Help Line and Text Line (which serve as the entry point to DAIS services), increased by 19.5%. Regarding contacts by victims who had never reached out to us before, the increase in the same time period was up by 37.5% and the total number of service hours provided by DAIS advocates through our Help Line and Text line in 2023 was up over 40% from the previous year.

As I mentioned, DAIS operates the only homicide prevention shelter for victims of intimate partner violence in Dane County. We use a national lethality assessment to assess people for this program and prioritize those who are at greatest risk of being murdered by their batterers. In 2023, DAIS advocates completed 835 shelter assessments. Of those 835, 51% were approved for shelter due to the potentially lethal situations they were in. However, due to resource limitations, 89% of the people approved for the DAIS shelter were ultimately waitlisted.

All of us at DAIS are extremely concerned about what will happen in Wisconsin should this legislation fail. All the programs across the state are deeply connected to one another and comprise the safety-net for victims of domestic violence and their children. Some programs are more vulnerable than others in terms of having to make difficult choices about limiting their programs or even closing their doors due to the impending loss of VOCA funds. The loss of even one shelter bed in Wisconsin will have ripple effects for us all, for even if DAIS is able to sustain our shelter, closures of other programs will mean that more and more victims will turn to those who remain to meet that need and I fear our waitlists will grow even further.

All of this is, of course, juxtaposed with the fact that Wisconsin has one of the highest domestic violence homicide rates in the country with those numbers increasing each year.


At DAIS we have worked hard over the last decade to diversify our revenue as much as possible given the fact that funding has not kept pace with the need. That said, this year alone we must raise \$2.1 million to fund our current operations which includes operating our shelter at a reduced census. Without additional support, DAIS will either have to close down some of our programs or increase our fundraising goal which is already extremely aggressive. We believe we have reached the top threshold of what we can accomplish with fundraising already.




There are some who believe shelters are becoming obsolete. I would say the hundreds of women, men and children DAIS shelters each year who are actively fleeing for their lives would disagree. In the words of one of our recent shelter clients, "I had no idea what to do or how [to do it], and every question I had was answered. Everyone here was so amazing and kind." Another stated, "I have absolutely no complaints about this phenomenal safe haven/peaceful shelter. Me and my family felt safe every single night in cozy beds. I will forever be thankful and will never forget each and every person that made safety possible for me and my three kiddos."

I strongly urge your support of AB 940 and am extremely grateful to the authors of this bill and all those who have co-sponsored it who see the need and want to ensure the safety of all Wisconsinites.

For Additional Questions: Shannon Barry, shannonb@abuseintervention.org or (608) 630-0687 (cell)



2000 Domanik Dr., Suite 404 
Racine, WI 53404

(262) 619-1634 
kfetherston@beleafsurvivors.org 
beleafsurvivors.org 

2/8/2024

To: Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

My name is Karen Fetherston and I am the Executive Director of BeLEAF Survivors, Racine County's Sexual Assault Services provider (SASP) as designated by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA). I am here today to voice my concern regarding federal funding reductions that will negatively impact sexual assault services in Racine County.

I have dire concerns about the funding of sexual assault victim services in the state of Wisconsin. The only state funds that Wisconsin allocates for these services is via the Sexual Assault Victim Services (SAVS) grant. SAVS has been woefully underfunded for years to meet the demands of survivors in the state and keep up with the costs of inflation. For a decade, it has remained stagnant while the demand for services has increased as has the cost of providing them to survivors. It is frustrating to have survivors wanting to heal and not have the capacity to assist in their healing.

Today, there is an alarming sense of urgency to increase our SAVS funding source since BeLEAF's primary federal funding source, Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant, will be a significantly reduced starting in October of 2024. How will this specifically impact BeLEAF Survivors in Racine, Wisconsin? We have been told that the Wisconsin DOJ will only be allocating a maximum amount of \$250,000 per annual VOCA award starting October 1, 2024. We've also been told that the number of grants given out to Wisconsin's victim service providers will decrease from 135 to 52. You can only imagine that those organizations fortunate enough to stay standing after that happens will not only be operating at decreased capacity, but also be asked to take up the slack and serve victims whose counties lost funding altogether.

If BeLEAF is one of the few dozen organizations to be funded, and if we receive the maximum amount of \$250,000 a year, we would be still facing a \$61,000 a year cut. That might not sound like much in terms of the budgets you are accustomed to managing, but it presents us with very difficult choices. After enduring years of lean funding, any fat that was in our budget has already been cut. These next cuts will be painful for staff and survivors. BeLEAF simply cannot absorb VOCA cuts of this magnitude without a reduction in direct services.

One choice could be cutting a position, likely a therapist, despite the mental health crisis in our community and overall lack of providers. BeLEAF currently has two therapists who together

provide more than 1,000 free therapy sessions to survivors each year. Even so, we operate with a waiting list of dozens of people and an average wait time to see a therapist fluctuates between 6 months to a year. Losing one of our two therapists would be devastating.

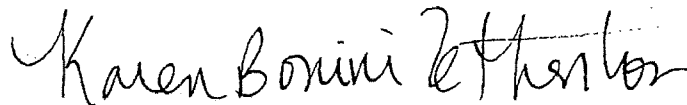
A different painful choice could be reducing staff hours across the board, deferring pay raises, and asking staff to contribute more for their health benefits. No one is in this work to get rich. It's a calling. Still, I fear this added financial burden could cause key staff to move on to other industries because passion doesn't pay bills. Either of these scenarios would mean the interruption or loss of some of BeLEAF's most essential and FREE direct services: a 24hr crisis line and hospital response to support survivors of sexual violence; clinical therapy and support groups lead by bilingual therapists; and legal, family, and personal advocacy during their healing journey.

Remember, that would be our best-case scenario under the VOCA cuts. At worst, if BeLEAF's proposal isn't deemed competitive enough to make the list of the 52 funded organizations, it would likely close our doors leaving Racine survivors with nowhere to turn at all. These are the things that keep me up at night.

I am excited to be here today to support AB940 which can bridge the gap that the VOCA crisis presents and ensure, at minimum, the status quo of service provision at Wisconsin's SASPs. It is a ray of hope for organizations like BeLEAF. Some among you might question why the state should need to remedy a fiscal mess that is not their fault. I would argue it's for the same reason that survivors need to address the trauma in their lives that is not their fault- because we can't change what happened, but we can work together to find a way through it.

I know that you care about sexual assault survivors. I hope that you also share my belief that they deserve a place to heal from the trauma they have experienced as well as my mantra that they shouldn't have to pay a dime to heal from what happened to them. This can happen with adequately funded SASPs.

Thank you for your time and any support you can offer.



Karen Bonini Fetherston
BeLEAF Survivors- Executive Director

Embrace Services, Inc.
107 Lindoo Avenue East
Ladysmith, Wisconsin 54848
(715) 532-6976
katie@embracewi.org



To: Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
Date: February 8th, 2024
From: Katie Bement, Executive Director at Embrace Services, Inc. (Embrace)
Re: Support for VOCA Funding Bill (AB 940)

Chairperson Spiros and Members of the Committee, my name is Katie Bement. I'm the Executive Director at Embrace, a 24/7 victim services program and emergency shelter in the rural Northwestern Wisconsin communities of Barron, Rusk, Price, and Washburn counties. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on AB 940 and to the legislative committee members who worked diligently to respond to the crisis we are facing.

We're officially in uncharted territory. The cuts to the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant program have gutted funding for the domestic and sexual violence victim services and shelter programs across the country, including Embrace. The cuts are significant enough that some of our sister programs across Wisconsin will be forced to shut down entirely. For Embrace, it means **we will lose about a 1/3 of our annual operating budget, at minimum.**

Unfortunately, our most basic safety planning and crisis intervention services we have been providing to victims since 1980 are going to have to be completely restructured. We will not be able to afford to have 24/7 staff onsite at the emergency shelter. Our office hours are going to be cut back. The 24/7 text crisis line will be eliminated. The safe custody exchange program we offered to families ended February 1. There will be significantly less prevention education, outreach, and awareness efforts connecting victims to our life-saving services. The speed in which people will receive help will change and **some victims might not get help at all.**

As you know, barriers to receiving help for domestic and sexual violence can lead to tragedy, and having to wait for help is definitely a barrier. I am terrified these funding cuts mean we will not be able to help someone in time before they are killed. Before their kids are killed. Wisconsin already leads the country in the number of domestic violence homicides. 1 in every 6 domestic violence deaths in the U.S. happened in Wisconsin¹. Just last week, Patricia Cooper was killed in our rural Price County community by her husband and then he committed suicide. **I am asking you today to support AB 940 and work with us to make sure help is there for these victims when they need it.** Prevent them from being killed and becoming another homicide statistic.

This bill is our last hope. In the small, rural, and impoverished communities Embrace serves, there is no possibility we will make up this devastating loss of annual funding with private sources. Additionally, VOCA was our largest source of financial match to other state and local grant programs maintaining housing and advocacy services. The loss of VOCA also destabilizes our other grant programs. **There is nowhere else to turn.**

What can you do? You can stand with victims, and make sure they can continue to get the help they need when they need it by supporting AB 940. Victims in our communities are counting on you.

¹ <https://ncadv.org/remember-my-name>





The Family Center

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To: Representative Spiros, Chair

Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

February 2, 2024

Re: AB 940

Dear Members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

The Wisconsin Rapids Family Center is pleased to speak to AB which will offset the impact of the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) cuts on nonprofit organizations that serve victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

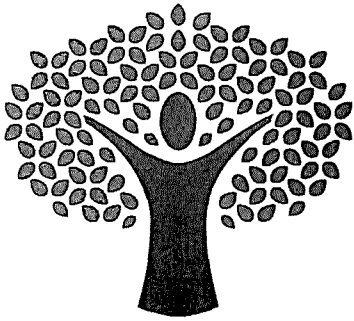
The Wisconsin Rapids Family Center provides safe shelter, advocacy, trauma informed care and prevention services to victims and their children, who are fleeing domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking. In 2023 nights of shelter provided exceeded 4,800 nights, often overflowing to couches, shared rooms and hotels. Services continue to be individualized and complex to each victim, however, VOCA cuts of nearly 70% will result in the inevitable loss of ability to continue vital services.

Domestic violence in Wisconsin is a pervasive, rising problem. In 2023, 96 individuals died in Wisconsin due to domestic violence at a rate of one death every 3.8 days. 1 in every 6 domestic violence homicides in the United States happen in Wisconsin. The economic cost of domestic violence is estimated at \$657 million per year. We cannot afford to lose vital services such as those provided at shelters like The Family Center which are proven to reduce the rate of domestic violence homicides.

Sincerely,

Tricia Fancher, Executive Director
Amy Scheide, Admin Development/Volunteer Coordinator
Jessica Jinsky, Program Services Manager
Heather Kirkpatrick, Finance and Operations Manager
Wisconsin Rapids Family Center





Family Advocates is a nonprofit organization serving victims of abuse in Southwestern Wisconsin. My name is Darlene Masters and I am the Executive Director. For over 40 years our agency has provided much needed services to those whose lives have been impacted by sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and more recently, human trafficking.

In 2023 alone, we served 463 individuals and had to turn away 289 people due to capacity issues. There were 4,971 nights spent in our shelter and 1,029 calls to our 24-hour crisis line. We are one agency, and these numbers are staggering.

Over the years, the needs of victims and survivors have increased without increases in funding to support the services and the efforts that are needed to enhance the lives of individuals and families that have been affected by abuse. We know that crimes such as domestic violence and sexual assault are grossly underreported and many victims do not seek services. However, with additional funding opportunities, there is also increased awareness that assists in helping victims come forward to begin their healing journey.

With the impending cuts to VOCA funding at the federal level, the need for increased dollars the need for increased dollars is more of a need. Investing in the lives of others through appropriate designation of funding through the bills before you is necessary and imperative.

I ask that you support the Senate Bill (SB877) and Assembly Bill (AB940) in order to continue to serve people who need assistance and deserve to live lives free of violence. These bills will have a positive impact on people within your own communities here in Wisconsin.

Thank you for this opportunity to present written testimony to you today. If you would like to reach me, please contact me at director@familyadv.org or 608-330-2604.



February 7, 2024

Dear Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice Public Safety,

I am writing to implore you to support Assembly Bill 940, which includes an increase in funding for Child Advocacy Centers across the State of Wisconsin. Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are the ONE non-profit to serve as the first stop for children suspected to be victims of sexual abuse, severe physical abuse, and those who have witnessed a violent crime. CACs provide a safe, child-friendly environment where law enforcement, child protective services, prosecution, medical and mental health professionals may share information and develop effective, coordinated strategies sensitive to the needs of each unique case and child. CACs provide a neutral location to assist law enforcement, Child Protective Services and District Attorneys Office with conducting investigations of child maltreatment, which at the same time providing supportive services to the child to heal from the abuse and trauma they experienced.

In 2023, over 7,000 children received critical services at Wisconsin's CACs. In current statute, Wisconsin's 15 CACs receive just \$17,000 annually in state funding, specifically for medical quality assurance, training, and education. Wisconsin's CACs are at risk of significant funding cuts in future years due to critical funding streams, such as the Victims of Crime Act, being drastically reduced. With this, critical services to Wisconsin's child victims of maltreatment will inevitably be cut or reduced. Wisconsin CACs receive some of the lowest state funding out of the nation.

Wisconsin: just \$255,000 annually

compared to:

Illinois: \$11,000,000 annually

North Dakota: \$6,750,000 annually

Iowa: \$1,068,285 annually

Michigan: \$1,300,000 annually

Indiana: \$1,500,000 annually

The Willow Tree Cornerstone Child Advocacy Center is one of 15 Child Advocacy Centers in Wisconsin, located at 503 S. Monroe Ave Green Bay WI. Willow Tree receives referrals from Law Enforcement and Child Protective Services agencies throughout Northeast Wisconsin to assist with an active child abuse investigation. Willow Tree provides vital services as a child and their family navigates through a criminal investigation, while at the same time providing supportive services to help the family move forward to heal from the trauma they have experienced.

Services offered at Willow Tree, consist of Child Forensic Interviewing, supportive victim advocacy services, Child Abuse Medical Evaluations, conducted by Children's Wisconsin, Child Abuse Prevention Education and Trauma Focused Counseling.

Child maltreatment investigations involve many different professionals, commonly referred to as a Multi-Disciplinary Team. These investigations involve Child Protective Services workers, Law Enforcement, Medical Providers, Advocates, Child Forensic Interviewers, Counselor, and Prosecutors. Instead of a child having to speak to everyone involved in the case, the child is provided with the opportunity to speak to a trained Child Forensic Interviewer regarding the abuse they experienced in a way that is sensitive to their needs, trauma informed and legally sound. All interviews at Willow Tree are recorded to preserve the child's statement. These recordings are submitted to evidence and can be used in subsequent legal proceedings.

Every child who comes to Willow Tree is provided an advocate to assist them through the investigation and healing process. Our Child Maltreatment Medical Team with Children's Wisconsin provides comprehensive medical evaluations to ensure that the child is physically healthy and safe, however these evaluations can also produce evidence to assist in the investigation.

The Willow Tree Child Abuse Prevention Education Program provides children with education about body safety, helping them to understand that they can say no and tell someone if they are

being abused. Willow Tree is proud to be part of the Green Bay Area Public School Districts core curriculum. With the partnership of the Green Bay School District, all children enrolled in grades Kindergarten through 6th grade receive child abuse prevention education, from the Willow Tree Prevention Specialist.

In 2023, Willow Tree conducted 384 Child Forensic Interviews, 188 Child Maltreatment Medical Evaluations and provided 9,509 children and 1,238 adults in Brown County Schools with Child Abuse Prevention Education. Willow Tree received 61% of referrals from Brown County Jurisdictions and 39% of referrals were received from jurisdictions outside of Brown County, primarily Northeastern Wisconsin. The most common age of a child who received a Child Forensic Interview at Willow Tree in 2023, was a 7-year-old female regarding an allegation of sexual abuse.

Every child who comes to Willow Tree Cornerstone Child Advocacy Center is unique and different in their own. No disclosure of abuse will be the same, however, one thing that remains consistent is that Willow Tree provides a safe, child-friendly environment to every child who walks through the doors. Willow Tree is here to support children from the start of an investigation and will continue to support them through their healing process. For every hardship we see at Willow Tree, we see hope in the eyes of the children we work with, we see resilience, we see children moving towards a safer future.

Our community is very fortunate to have a Child Advocacy Center to hold offenders accountable, keep communities safe and most importantly help children to heal. Children are some of the most vulnerable members of our society, they are our future leaders, parents, and professionals. It's not just Willow Tree supporting these children to a healthy adulthood, it is our communities and our State, who can be supporters so all our children can thrive and have the opportunity to grow into caring and healthy adults.

Thank you for your commitment and support to Willow Tree Cornerstone Child Advocacy Center. Your support for Assembly Bill 940 is vital to ensure that all CACs in the State of Wisconsin continue to provide help and support to children and to keep them safe.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kristie Sickel

Kristie Sickel, MSW, CSW
Program Manager and Child Forensic Interviewer
Willow Tree Cornerstone Child Advocacy Center
503 S. Monroe Ave.
Green Bay WI 54301
920-436-8881

To Whom it May Concern:

I am writing this in support of AB 940. As someone who has worked in the victim service field since 1989, I can speak firsthand to the importance of the work done by not only domestic violence/sexual assault organizations but also Child Advocacy Centers. Child Advocacy Centers have changed how Waukesha County has approached child abuse cases since our program opened in 2006. The coordination and efficiency that has been created by establishing a multidisciplinary team, who has a safe, neutral place to conduct part of their child abuse investigation has not only strengthened the working relationships between law enforcement, social services, victim serving agencies, the district attorney's office, and medical providers, it has also strengthened the engagement of child victims and their families in cooperating with these investigations. Child Advocacy Centers save communities money by this efficiency. Funding of these programs is vital to keep our communities safe.

Thank you,
Faith Holley-Beal

Faith Holley-Beal, MS, LCSW
Director, The C.A.R.E. Center
A program of Family Service
726 N. East Avenue
Waukesha, WI 53186
(262) 522-3680



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HS-512



7 February, 2024

The Honorable John Spiros
Chair
Committee on Criminal Justice and Public
Safety
Wisconsin Legislature
Room 212 North State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

The Honorable Ellen Schutt
Vice-Chair
Committee on Criminal Justice and Public
Safety
Wisconsin Legislature
Room 316 North State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Chair Spiros and Vice-Chair Schutt:

We are writing to you today regarding A.B. 940, which increases grants to non-profits or public organizations that provide services to victims of sexual assault. We ask for your support in favor of this legislation.

As you may be aware, RAINN is the nation's largest anti-sexual assault organization. Founded in 1994, RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE and hotline.rainn.org). Every 68 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted¹, and authorities find evidence that a child in America has been the victim of sexual abuse every nine minutes². 75% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police³, and 975 perpetrators will walk free out of every 1,000 sexual assaults⁴. RAINN works tirelessly to develop state and federal policies to ensure that survivors have access to justice and healing in the aftermath of violence.

¹ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2019 (2020). Note: RAINN applies a 5-year rolling average to adjust for changes in the year-to-year NCVS survey data.

² United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. Child Maltreatment Survey, 2016 (2018).

³ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2018.

⁴ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2015-2019 (2020).



Leading the National Effort to End Sexual Violence

In Wisconsin, 1,300,000 women and 637,000 men have experienced contact sexual violence⁵. Currently, these survivors have access to more than 60 service providers across Wisconsin, each offering services such as crisis lines, advocacy, safety planning, counseling, or support groups.

However, beginning in October of 2024, Wisconsin's Department of Justice predicts that the amount of funding available to Wisconsin through the Victims of Crime Act will decrease by 70%⁶. This decrease will have a significant impact on sexual assault service providers' ability to meet the current and developing needs of survivors across Wisconsin, leaving survivors without access to legal, medical, or emotional advocates.

A.B. 940 provides unequivocal support for sexual assault service providers across Wisconsin and mitigates the financial impact of the Victims of Crimes Act's decrease in funding. Its passage would ensure the physical and emotional well-being of thousands of survivors across Wisconsin.

As such, we urge you to support this bill and pass it out of committee. Thank you for your continued leadership and for supporting victims of sexual violence in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Berkowitz".

Scott Berkowitz
President

⁵ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2016-2017 (2023)

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of Crime Victim Services, Victims of Crime Act Funding Update, 2023.

RAINN

Leading the National Effort to End Sexual Violence

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800.656.HOPE | rainn.org

1220 L Street NW | Suite 500 | Washington, DC 20005 | 202-544-1034 | info@rainn.org