

Advocates: State budget leaves domestic violence victims vulnerable

The Daily News

Published: May 03, 2008 03:21 am

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BOSTON — Advocates for domestic abuse victims say programs would suffer and fewer victims would receive help if House lawmakers approve plans to cut or freeze spending on emergency shelters and violence prevention programs in the budget they're considering this week.

Suzanne Dubus, executive director of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, said the \$27.9 billion House budget in its current form would severely affect her ability to provide services to battered women.

"Right now, the state demands a lot of work and in-depth expert programming for victims of family violence with very little resources," Dubus said. "If we were to suffer a further cut, it would be potentially devastating."

The Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, which serves victims in the Great Newburyport area, relies on state funding for 49 percent of its budget. The center works to raise \$600,000 to \$700,000 a year, which Dubus said is already quite a burden for the center.

Dubus notes that while she would try not to cut programs in the event of a budget freeze or cut, the number who would benefit from the crisis center's programs would diminish.

"We would cut our ability to provide to a number of people," she said. "We wouldn't cut legal advocacy, but instead of offering it to 400 victims, we would offer to only 300 or 200."

Mary O'Brien, deputy director of the YWCA of Greater Lawrence echoed Dubus' sentiments and feels something has to be done.

"The ideal situation is to somehow increase the funding so women don't die, children aren't left without parents, and people have prevention services," O'Brien said.

The state has not increased spending for domestic violence prevention in eight years, which O'Brien and other advocates said is a factor in a rash of domestic homicides statewide this year.

According to Jane Doe Inc., a statewide coalition of community-based sexual assault and domestic violence groups, there were 10 domestic homicides in Massachusetts in the first four months of the year. One was a March murder-suicide in Lawrence, in which Joseph Domurat killed his wife, Noreen.

"There's almost been one murder a week in Massachusetts (over the past year)," O'Brien said. "The reason for that is because for eight years we haven't had an increase (in funding)."

Overall, victims' advocates want the state to spend \$10.9 million more than the House is proposing, raising funding on domestic violence programs to \$41.7 million from the \$30.5 million spent this fiscal year.

"It always makes me scratch my head when we talk about cutting social service funding despite the backdrop this year of a 200 percent increase of homicides," Dubus said. "The Department of Social Services just got a D plus (according to a Boston newspaper) at handling child welfare. It seems if you want things to improve, you have to let the funding go to the people who can provide that type of help and resources. It's a strange duality."

According to the budget, the House would spend \$29.46 million on the domestic violence line items O'Brien and Dubus want increased. Some programs within those line items are cut while others are level-funded. Gov. Deval Patrick's budget effectively level-funded those line items.

"We really need an increase," O'Brien said. "We're a not-for-profit business, but we're a business. Our cost of doing business has gone up."

Mary Lauby, executive director of Jane Doe Inc., said \$10 million now is a small investment to reduce domestic abuse.

"We're easily spending over \$50 million on investigating and prosecuting domestic violence homicides," Lauby said. "We're asking for less than half of that in programs we know will bring that rate down."

The YWCA of Greater Lawrence serves 10 area communities, including Amesbury, Andover, Haverhill, Lawrence, Methuen and North Andover. It provides a variety of services to domestic abuse victims. It offers emergency shelter and counseling to abuse and rape victims. It has two legal advisers in Lawrence District Court. It provides violence prevention courses in area public and private schools.

House lawmakers are debating the budget this week. The Senate takes up the budget next month.

A spokesman for the House Ways and Means chairman, Rep. Robert DeLeo, D-Winthrop, denied House leaders were slashing spending on domestic violence prevention and treatment.

James Eisenberg, chief of staff to DeLeo, said the House Ways and Means budget plan actually increases spending on domestic violence prevention by \$175,000 over this year's budget. He also said that the draft spending plan fully funds a batterer's intervention program at about \$800,000.

"The chairman remains deeply committed to providing victims of domestic violence and sexual assault with the care, protection and services they need and will be working to the best of his ability to address those concerns in the days ahead," Eisenberg said.