
Remarks by Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director, Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence
Regarding Victims of Crime Act funds and the Biennial Budget
Before the Joint Standing Committees of Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Judiciary
February 11, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Judiciary Committees, my name is Francine Garland Stark, Executive Director of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence. As this committee considers matters related to funding services for crime victims, we hope that you will find the information I and others are presenting today to be a helpful frame of reference. We are grateful for the \$3 million in ongoing funding included in the governor's proposed budget to partially fill the funding gap created by a substantial reduction in Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding from the federal government. Unfortunately, \$3 million will cover only half of the funding gap, and we ask the committee to increase this to \$6 million in order to continue the critical state funding allocated on a one-time basis in the last session that filled the funding gap for the current fiscal year. There is no indication from the federal level that the Victims of Crime Fund will be restored for at least several more years.

What is VOCA?

Enacted in 1984, the Victims of Crime Act, which is typically referred to as VOCA, is the central source of federal financial support for direct services to victims of crime, and the largest single source of victim services specific funding in Maine. It is administered at the federal level through the US Dept. of Justice Office for Victims of Crime. Each state and territory receives a grant annually to distribute to the organizations that provide direct services to victims of crime. The amount each state or territory receives is determined through a formula, not a competitive process. There are also VOCA grants that go directly to Tribal victim service providers.

The funding for VOCA does not come from tax dollars. It is a special fund into which fines, penalty assessments, bond forfeitures collected from convicted federal offenders, and certain other collections are deposited. Each state determines what entity is responsible for administering these funds in compliance with the federal rules and regulations, including the sub-granting process. The State Administrating Agency for Maine is the Department of Health and Human Services, with the

staff responsible for this work located in the Office of Violence Intervention & Response Programs that is within the Office of Child and Family Services.

Second: What can and does VOCA fund in Maine?

From the initial grant in 1985 through 2014, the VOCA fund at the federal level was stable and growing, with funds going in and out as intended. The annual grants fluctuated a bit, but the amount Maine received remained about the same year to year, with occasional increases bringing the state award to around \$2 million from the late 1990s until 2014. During that time, Maine's VOCA funds were granted to the Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers, Sexual Assault Centers, and District Attorney's Offices to support Victim Witness Advocates.

As the amount of money accumulating in the VOCA fund grew, the federal administrators in 2015 decided to increase the amount of funds being distributed, resulting in a significant increase to state grants nationwide. For Maine, the grant increased in 2015 to nearly \$8.5 million and reached a high of \$9.5 million in the 2016 grant award.

Note: The state has 4 years to fully expend each grant award, which allows the state administrator to manage the amount being allocated to subgrantees year to year, maintaining a consistent rather than fluctuating grant award.

This increase in VOCA dollars allowed Maine to modestly increase support for existing services and to expand support for crime victims including:

1. programs serving underserved populations particularly older adults and New Mainers,
2. civil legal representation,
3. Children's Advocacy Centers,
4. Coordination and support in the Attorney General's Office for the county-based Victim Witness Advocates,
5. the Court Appointed Special Advocate program in the Judicial Branch,
6. Victim Services in the Dept. of Corrections,
7. and increased funds for domestic violence shelter staffing, better meeting the complex needs of shelter residents with substance use disorders and their children, and establishing an emergency shelter for victims of sex trafficking.

During this time, under the administration of Governor LePage, DHHS went through a process of re-evaluating the allocation of various federal block grants and state general funds, pivoting to reliance on VOCA funds for victim services, significantly decreasing the utilization of social services block grants and state funds to support existing victim services. This meant that, despite the large increase in the VOCA allocation to Maine, existing victim services providers receiving VOCA funds did not realize a significant increase in overall funding.



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Third: What is the problem we are facing with VOCA?

Beginning in 2016, there were shenanigans at the federal level that negatively affected the VOCA fund. First, to balance the federal budget, congress took several hundred million dollars out of the Victims of Crime Fund to pay for some of the Violence Against Women Act Program costs, which depleted the fund dramatically. Second, deposits to the Victims of Crime Fund decreased substantially due to changes in federal prosecuting practices. There have been steps taken at the federal level to fix the problem, but those efforts will take time to replenish the funds, and for at least several more years, grants to states will be affected, with grants to Maine anticipated to be even less than FY2024's \$3.4 million.

Fourth: What does this mean for Maine domestic violence victims?

VOCA funds support both high quality, reliable, statewide advocacy for crime victims directly and the development of close collaborative efforts to improve the response of law enforcement and attention to victims' rights in the criminal legal system.

Today, when the police respond to a domestic violence call, they provide contact information to the local Domestic Violence Resource Center to be able to initiate a call to that crime victim to offer support and explore what they may need for immediate safety and to help link that victim with other VOCA funded support. None of us work in isolation. We are a network serving Maine's families in crisis and beyond.

VOCA funds impact every step of a domestic violence survivor and their children from being trapped and afraid to living abuse free in safe and stable homes. In 2024, Maine's Regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers served nearly 15,000 people, of whom 8,572 accessed services through the 24-hour helpline. Advocates supported 5,980 people with court advocacy across Maine's 26 District Courts, and 1,016 people with shelter and/or long-term housing assistance, including 490 children. At least half of the people we serve have at least one child. All of this work depends on VOCA funds, and the state funds allocated to fill the gap.

A few words from a survivor regarding her experience of accessing VOCA funded services:

From the moment the Domestic Violence Resource Center opened the door to me – the first helpline call, there was help for whatever challenge I ran into, and if they couldn't help, they found me the resources. They helped me to obtain a Protection from Abuse Order against my abuser and later helped me with my divorce. They provided support and safety planning when my protection order was due to expire and helped me to obtain an extension for another 2 years. Because of the services and support that they provided, I have been able to rebuild my life and keep my son safe. They have been steadfast in their support over the past 16+ years. This took on many forms, such as helping me navigate multiple modifications of the custody agreement for my son, finding a safe place for custody exchanges, and helping me make a mandated report because of what my abuser had done. They were with me every step of the way. Because of their support, my son can be himself entirely, without fear of harm from someone that is supposed to have his trust; and I can sleep knowing that we are safe.