

Budget cuts hurting domestic violence victims

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Photo. Mallette

In late February, a Takilma man was arrested after his wife fled to a neighbor's house, saying he had attacked and choked her in front of their children. Initial reports indicated the man told his wife during the assault, "Go ahead and call the cops, because they won't come anyway."

Sheriff's deputies did respond, but it took them about 50 minutes to get to the remote area, where the family was living in an isolated, "off-the-grid" home.

Law enforcement officials and domestic violence advocates say the thin police presence in Josephine County's rural areas is hurting domestic violence victims.

Christine Mallette, executive director of the Illinois Valley Safe House Alliance, has been working at the nonprofit since 2001 and has witnessed the effects of the county's shrinking public safety budget on domestic violence survivors. Federal payments to the county — which have long funded public safety services — began dropping off in 2006 as Congress looked to phase out the county payments program.

"It's been a real slow erosion, so just little by little we noticed that survivors were much less likely to call for help," she said.

The county received \$4.8 million in federal timber subsidies for the current fiscal year, but so far Congress has been reluctant to renew it for the fiscal year that starts in July.

Prior to 2006, the county received between \$12 million and \$15 million a year. A public safety levy on the May ballot would pay for more patrol deputies, but county voters have so far been reluctant to approve any new taxes.

With patrols already limited to 10 hours a day, there will be even fewer deputies to respond to rural crimes if the county doesn't find a new revenue source. Mallette said it can raise the danger level if an abuser sees the victim calling for help and then help doesn't arrive quickly.

"It could make the situation worse for them," she said of victims.

Ray Dinkins, prevention coordinator for the Women's Crisis Support Team in Grants Pass, said the organization is sometimes aware of domestic violence emergencies while they're happening. However, his organization doesn't send advocates to the location until law enforcement arrives and secures the scene.

"When the county suffers from funding that keeps criminal justice in a minimum capacity where not everybody is receiving services, our services can't fill that gap. We're not capable," Dinkins said. "We're not law enforcement."

Sheriff Dave Daniel, who currently has six patrol deputies on the road, laments that he doesn't have more manpower available. "Where we're at now does make it difficult," he said.

Daniel said any deputy responding to a domestic violence call gives the victim information on how to connect with Women's Crisis Support Team and other resources.

"Our goal is not just to leave them high and dry," he said. "Obviously, they just went through a tragic event, and our goal is to help them the best we can, not just by arresting (the suspect) but by putting them in touch with resources where they can get help."

Battered women — or men, in a few cases — aren't the only crime victims affected by the county's budget crisis. Property crimes often go uninvestigated, for instance, and neighborhood watch groups have sprung up all over the county as residents band together.

But Deputy District Attorney Christopher Morgan, who prosecutes many of the county's domestic violence cases, said domestic abuse victims are among the most vulnerable crime victims.

"When you have that limited resource in the county, it's actually the domestic violence cases that are perhaps the most affected," he said. "Oftentimes, the folks in those cases are not in a position to defend themselves like they could in a property crime."

One challenge in prosecuting domestic violence cases is that the victims are sometimes reluctant to cooperate.

"On one hand, they are concerned for their safety. On the other hand, it's a person that they love and they don't want to see get in trouble ... It's often a tightrope that we walk," Morgan said.

Offenders are sometimes arrested against the victim's wishes; in Oregon, an officer who has probable cause to believe certain domestic violence crimes have been committed is required to make an arrest.

Some statistics from the District Attorney's Office illustrate how budget cuts in the past few years have affected domestic violence prosecutions.

In 2011, the office prosecuted 206 domestic violence cases involving charges of menacing, strangulation or fourth-degree assault — the most common domestic violence charges.

The numbers dropped off in mid-2012, when budget cuts forced the layoffs of about half of the county's prosecutors; in the first half of 2012, 84 such cases were prosecuted, but the number fell to 51 in the second half of the year.

As former District Attorney Stephen Campbell built his office back up after the 2012 cuts, the number of cases increased to 100 in 2013, and then to 149 last year.

The Women's Crisis Support Team offers a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week crisis hotline, an emergency shelter that can house about a dozen women and their children, court advocacy, support groups, and financial assistance. It also provides other services. The Illinois Valley Safe House has similar offerings, including crisis intervention, parenting groups and prevention programs.

"The only thing we don't have is a shelter, but we provide short-term motel stays," Mallette said.

She said victims shouldn't be too hard on themselves if they find themselves in an abusive situation.

"You can do everything right and still end up being a victim of domestic violence, or dating violence, or sexual assault," she said.

However, Mallette said, there are early-warning signs of someone who could end up being abusive down the line.

"I always tell women to take things slowly," she said. "One of the red flags is if they push for too much intimacy too quickly."

Abusers tend to isolate their significant other from friends and family to increase their level of control over the person.

Dinkins said abuse victims are sometimes reluctant to seek help because they feel they will lose whatever level of control they have over the situation. He said the Women's Crisis Support Team keeps information confidential and — unless the victim is in imminent danger — allows victims to set the pace of any assistance they're given.

"We don't move ahead of the victim," he said.

Warning signs of an abuser:

- Jealousy: Checking another person's cellphone, interrogating them about their activities
- Controlling behavior: Telling the other person what to wear, or whom to hang out with
- Isolating the victim: Discouraging contact with friends or family
- Suspicion: Accusing the other person of flirting or cheating
- Criticism: Telling the victim they can't do anything right
- Property: Damaging a person's property or threatening their pets

Resources

- Women's Crisis Support Team, Grants Pass
www.westjoco.com
24-hour crisis line 541-479-9349
- Illinois Valley Safe House Alliance, Cave Junction
www.ivsha.org
541-592-2515
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
www.ncadv.org
800-799-SAFE (7233)

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