

US budget cuts devastate shelters for victims of domestic violence

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The combination of budget cuts and economic recession has had a devastating impact on women who have suffered domestic violence. Federal and state funding for emergency shelters and other services is being cut even as the need for emergency shelter is going up. And when a woman leaves an abuser, she finds it increasingly difficult to find a job, let alone one that can pay for housing and utilities.

Haven, the only shelter for victims of domestic and sexual violence in Oakland County, Michigan, the northwestern suburbs of Detroit, opened in 1979. Besides offering emergency shelter, Haven provides counseling, prevention education and advocate programs. There are three other shelters in the Detroit metropolitan area: one in Macomb County, in the northeastern suburbs, one in western Wayne county and one in Detroit.

Haven president and CEO Beth Morrison described the recent funding cuts: “We get 48 percent of our funding from the government, mostly federal funds. Less than 10 percent is state dollars. We get one direct grant from the federal government, with most of the federal funds getting passed through state agencies.

“October 1, 2011, starts our fiscal year. For one of the funds for crime victims, we received an 8 to 9 percent cut. Because of the Victims of Crime Act funding cuts, we laid off an advocate. Advocates are at the district courts to meet with victims of domestic violence and help them navigate the court system. Now we have one less person at the courts.

“A much bigger cut was the cut in Community Development Block Grant money. It’s dollars that the federal government passes to municipalities based on the poverty level. The municipalities can give some dollars to human service agencies. The federal level was cut about 45 percent for 2011. That meant a

significant cut for us. Some municipalities weren’t able to give us any funds at all.”

Most state of Michigan funds for victims of domestic violence were cut under Republican governor John Engler (1990-2002) and not restored under his Democratic successor, Jennifer Granholm (2002-2010). The new Republican governor, Rick Snyder, was not proposing further cuts because the funding was already so low. “We’re probably not even on their radar,” Morrison said.

Haven’s web site states that 50 percent of homelessness among women and children is due to domestic violence. Morrison explained, “Studies have looked at the root causes of homelessness. For many women, homelessness started because of domestic violence.

“She leaves her abuser and may stay with family or friends couch surfing, or go to a shelter. The cycle begins there. Homelessness might be short-lived or longer. Maybe 10 years later, she’s still homeless. If you ask her why, she might say she can’t find a job. But domestic violence started her on the path.

“We are an emergency shelter for someone who has immediate safety needs because of domestic and sexual violence. They’re in a violent relationship and not safe and don’t have a place to go.

“However, we’re seeing people needed to stay in the shelter longer. They may leave and go into a homeless shelter. They’re still struggling to find a place to stay.

“The current average stay is 35 days. Nine years ago, it was 24 days. The increase is because people can’t find affordable housing or a livable income. A person must be able to become financially independent. But affordable and safe housing is not easy to find. A livable wage is not easy to find.”

In fact, the Michigan League for Human Services reported in December 2011 that the cost of renting an apartment grew by more than 25 percent over the past 10 years, even though jobs and incomes fell.

The league calculates that a household must earn \$29,786 a year to afford a two-bedroom apartment, without paying more than 30 percent of their income for rent and utilities, called fair market rent. A person working full-time year round would need to earn \$14.32 an hour. Statewide and in 64 Michigan counties, more than half the population cannot afford fair market rent.

Even with the funding cuts, many shelters are operating above capacity. “Our target is to have 45 individuals, women and children,” said Morrison. “We have 15 bedrooms. Over the last month or six weeks, we’ve been at 125 percent of capacity. The number we can’t help went up 20 percent between 2009 and 2010 and has stayed at that level.”

As financial strains and job losses increase, shelters have reported an increase in domestic violence. Morrison explained the relationship. “We’ve seen a lot more physical injuries recently. The poor economy doesn’t make a person abusive. But the severity of the violence increases. People call and say they may have had emotional abuse before, but now there’s physical violence. Or now they believe their life really is in danger.”

Morrison described other changes Haven is seeing because of the recession. “Middle-income folks came for counseling but didn’t need other assistance. Now they may tell us they can’t come every week because they don’t have gas. Or they need counseling but also other services because they’re strapped financially.”

On November 1, 2011, Michigan began eliminating cash assistance to women and children. Haven has already seen the effects of this cut to the welfare system. Morrison said, “Right before the holidays, we had two large families, and both women had been cut off assistance. Before, we had been able to help get them assistance. But for those women, that was a well we couldn’t go to. And working raises a lot of other issues, like child care. One family didn’t even have transportation. Today, there’s not a living wage for everyone.”

Michigan is not alone in cuts to domestic violence shelters. May Kay, the makeup and skin care company,

released its “National Findings from Third Survey of Domestic Violence Shelters in the United States” in April 2011. The survey was created to understand how the recession and budget cuts affected shelters from September 2008 to March 2011. The survey results noted:

- Three out of four shelters indicate their funding has decreased the most from government organizations.
- 65 percent of women in shelters can’t find a job due to the economy.
- 45 percent of shelters decreased their services due to the economy.
- 75 percent of shelters see an increase in women with children seeking assistance.

As states began announcing budget cuts in 2011, many domestic violence shelters faced program cuts. In Georgia, Governor Nathan Deal proposed \$4.5 million budget cuts for domestic violence shelters, eliminating state funding. The state proposed money be used from a federal fund, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. However, there are strict regulations for using TANF funds, and shelters would be required to turn away many victims. For example, single women with children might not qualify for help, even though they make up 31 percent of domestic violence and sexual assault victims.

Hope House of Central Wisconsin saw four of its grants cut significantly, including its grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Obama’s 2009 stimulus bill. Its state Emergency Shelter Grant was not funded for 2012. The federal Emergency Food and Shelter Program gave Hope House a grant of \$25,000 in 2011, and it looks like it will provide no funds in 2012.

In Washington state, at the end of October 2011, the Department of Social and Health Services notified organizations with domestic violence programs it would reduce state funds for domestic violence by 25 percent January 1, 2012, and another 50 percent the following July 1.



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