

MEDIA ADVISORY – June 21, 2021

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Local Victims of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Abuse Will Pay the Price for Funding Cuts to Important Services in WNC

A loss of millions of dollars in state funding is threatening to disrupt services for WNC victims of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking, as well as similar services across the state.

Pisgah Legal Services, Our VOICE, Helpmate, and the Mediation Center's Family Visitation Program learned June 16 that the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission would not continue grant funding for several ongoing, longtime services. These four organizations provide a continuum of complementary and non-duplicative services to victims.

These grants, which come from the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission's allocation of federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) and Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) funds, are scheduled to end on September 30, 2021.

Replacement funding is critically needed from local governments, donors, faith communities, and foundations to mitigate this loss and prevent a dire lack of services for victims.

This loss of funding comes at a time when services are needed most. Especially during the lockdown phase of the pandemic, adult and child survivors were trapped in homes with abusers, unable to access support networks including extended family, childcare and schools, religious groups, and other organizations. Our community is now experiencing what the United Nations has dubbed the "shadow pandemic," wherein survivors are emerging and seeking help as economic and social conditions improve.

Pisgah Legal Services, Helpmate, Our VOICE, and The Mediation Center are determined to work in partnership with our community to mitigate the effect of these cuts and ensure that the most vulnerable do not continue to be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

What Is The Impact?



Pisgah Legal Services, which provides free legal services to help people experiencing domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking to escape abuse and rebuild their lives, lost \$1.2 million in VOCA funding over the next two years. Pisgah Legal Services' attorneys, advocates, and support staff help people obtain court protective orders, custody of their children, safe homes, and resources so that they can separate from their abusers. People who cannot afford an attorney suffer greater harm because they have much more difficulty separating their lives from their abusers. Unrepresented victims are more likely to return to their abusers for economic reasons or to protect their children. Pisgah Legal fills this gap for victims.

These funds would have enabled Pisgah Legal Services to serve more than 2,000 adults and children per year and paid most of the costs for five attorneys, two victim advocates, two legal assistants, and an immigration law advocate. This grant is Pisgah Legal Services' largest abuse prevention grant. It is used to serve clients in rural areas of 17 Western North Carolina counties, mostly outside of Buncombe County, with services prioritized for people of color and people in more remote areas, who have been the most adversely affected by the pandemic.



Helpmate, Buncombe County's domestic violence advocacy and crisis response organization, lost \$283,000 in VOCA funding for each of the next two years. These grant dollars are foundational to Helpmate's work, funding services in shelter, court advocacy, and case management. This is a loss of funding for five full-time advocates as well as direct financial assistance for emergency survivor needs.

Court advocates serve 800 survivors a year as they seek legal remedies to secure safety and hold the perpetrator accountable. Child and family case managers provide specialized services to 395 families annually; these services mitigate the impact of family violence on children. Helpmate provides shelter for about 225 individuals per year. Advocates deliver services to survivors in the highest danger and with the fewest resources.

Helpmate experienced a significant increase in demand during the pandemic, providing shelter for 50% more people from April to September of 2020 compared with the prior year. Even during the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, Helpmate is dedicated to answering every hotline call, providing shelter for those fleeing terror in their own homes, and accompanying survivors as they create lives free from violence.



Our VOICE is the crisis intervention and prevention agency that serves victims of sexual violence and human trafficking, ages 13 to adult, in Buncombe County. Our VOICE lost VOCA funding of \$298,000 over a two-year period. This substantial amount is critical to the operation of Our VOICE and represents a loss of funding for three full-time positions as well as a 53% decrease in the organization's capacity to provide counseling services.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, sexual assault and human trafficking survivors experienced increased vulnerability to ongoing abuse, anxiety, isolation, and loss of autonomy. Some experienced new triggers, while other triggers which were previously manageable resurfaced as a result of the pandemic. This is reflected in an increase in demand for Our VOICE services: The organization provided 56% more counseling services in 2021 compared with 2020, and has provided 970 counseling sessions so far in 2021. In the first quarter of the year alone, Our VOICE served 94 new counseling clients. In addition, the organization received 326% more human trafficking calls in the first half of 2021 compared with the first half of 2020. Our VOICE assisted these callers with counseling, advocacy, case management, transportation, emergency shelter, food, clothing, medical assistance, information, and referrals.



The Mediation Center’s Family Visitation Program provides supervised visitation and safe child exchange in cases of domestic violence and child sexual abuse. Services prevent ongoing violence, abuse, and trauma to child and adult victims during visits and exchanges, which are often court-ordered. Many families depend on this service for safety: In the past six years, the Mediation Center’s Family Visitation Program has provided more than 4,200 supervised visits and exchanges. The \$200,000 from the Governor’s Crime Commission’s VAWA fund supports three full-time equivalent employees, including 100 hours per week of staffing by employees who directly provide services to adult and child victims. This grant would have funded visitation and exchange services for more than 50 families who, without the service, would have to encounter abusers in non-secure locations.

Family Visitation Program services continued during the pandemic, but were disrupted by lockdowns, court closures, victims’ inability to leave abusers due to economic strain and limited support, as well as decreased reports of child abuse due to school closures and children’s isolation. Over the past three months, the Family Visitation Program has seen a rapid increase in demand for supervised visits as things return to normal, with more than 20 new families seeking services.

Impact Summary		
501(c)3 Organization	Total Financial Gap	Services
Pisgah Legal Services	\$1.2 million over 2 years	Legal services for 2000+ victims per year of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and human trafficking
Helpmate	\$566,000 over 2 years	Court advocacy and case management services for 1100+ victims of domestic violence
Our VOICE	\$298,000 over 2 years	Ongoing counseling and case management to 130+ survivors of sexual violence or human trafficking and outreach to over 1000 community members of BIPOC, LGBTQ, and elderly populations.
The Mediation Center/Family Visitation Program	\$200,000 over 1 year	Ongoing supervised visitation and safe child exchange services for 50+ families per year in domestic violence and child sexual assault cases.
	TOTAL: \$2,298,000	More than 4000 people

What Caused This Loss?

VOCA grant dollars have decreased nationally and the impact on our community is severe. The VOCA fund is filled by fines and penalties from federal prosecutions and a change in administrative process over the past several years greatly depleted the fund. There is a bipartisan solution moving through Congress to fix the issue. Unfortunately, even after this solution, known as the VOCA Fix, is enacted, it will take four to five years to feel the impact for programs in our community that rely on these funds. The Mediation Center's Family Visitation Program believes that the program's loss of VAWA funds was due to redistribution of decreased VOCA funds; the two sources fund similar programs.

What Happens Now?

Local governments could use American Rescue Plan Act funds to fill these gaps. Foundations could make substantial grants to ensure victims are served during this critical period. Gifts from individuals, corporations, and faith groups will be essential. Thousands of victims in our community depend on these organizations to heal from abuse. Ensuring ongoing availability of these critical services is a necessary step in individuals' recovery from abuse and in our community's recovery from COVID-19.

How Can I Help?

Make a donation to one of the following local nonprofits:

- Pisgah Legal Services: <https://www.pisgahlegal.org>
- Helpmate: <https://helpmateonline.org/>
- Our VOICE: <https://www.ourvoicenc.org/>
- The Mediation Center: <https://mediatewnc.org/>

Contact these elected state officials to encourage them to replace this important community funding:

- Rep. Tim Moore, Speaker of the N.C. House, Tim.Moore@ncleg.gov, (919) 733-3451
- Sen. Phil Berger, President Pro Tempore of the N.C. Senate, Phil.Berger@ncleg.gov, (919) 733-5708
- Senior Chairs of the N.C. House Appropriations Committee:
 - Rep. Dean Arp, Dean.Arp@ncleg.gov, (704) 282-0418
 - Rep. Donny Lambeth, Donny.Lambeth@ncleg.gov, (919) 733-5747
 - Rep. Jason Saine, Jason.Saine@ncleg.gov, (919)733-5782
- Chairs of the N.C. Senate Appropriations Committee:
 - Sen. Kathy Harrington, Kathy.Harrington@ncleg.gov, (919) 733-5734
 - Sen. Ralph Hise, Ralph.Hise@ncleg.gov, (919) 733-3460
 - Sen. Brent Jackson, Brent.Jackson@ncleg.gov, (919) 733-5705