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After funding cuts, nonprofits for domestic-violence survivors scale back

A federal fund for organizations that help survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault is nearly depleted.

By [Ellie Silverman](#) | [September 17, 2024](#)

Organizations that support survivors of domestic violence and child abuse across the country are paring back resources — or preparing to shut down shelters — due to a dramatic drop in federal funds.

For fiscal year 2024, Congress set a funding cap of \$1.35 billion — about \$600 million less than last year for the Crime Victims Fund, as its reserve dwindled. Advocates fear that without a funding fix they may stare down an even bigger hole next year.

A cut of this magnitude will have a “catastrophic” impact on survivors, said Teresa Huizar, CEO of the D.C.-based National Children’s Alliance, a network of nearly 1,000 advocacy centers.

The need for programs such as domestic violence hotlines, rape crisis centers and legal assistance, [has only grown](#), advocates say.

The fund — which is administered by the Department of Justice — supports more than 6 million survivors of crime, according to the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

In the D.C. region, this year’s cut has translated into a decrease of \$200,000 — or 11 percent — for **Doorways**, Arlington’s sole provider of crisis services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Leaders say that means one less advocate to go to court with survivors; one less community advocate to help with safety planning and connecting survivors to resources; two less case managers for shelter and housing programs.

One mother interviewed by The Washington Post said **Doorways’** services helped her come to terms with the abuse she endured and find the courage to leave.

“I couldn’t see any light,” said the woman, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she was concerned for her safety. “**Doorways** brought me hope.”

Doorways manages six apartments in northern Virginia to house survivors leaving abusive relationships, but may have to close those sites because of funding cuts, leaders said.

President and CEO **Diana Ortiz** worries about cutting back on the organization's crisis response, which includes the 24-hour hotline and accompanying survivors to the hospital and shelter. And she dreads a volunteer needing to tell a woman fleeing abuse: "Can you just wait 12 hours because we don't have the staff?"

The impact of the funding cuts has been mixed across the D.C. region.

Micaela Deming, policy director of DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said city funding helped close the gap in federal money for D.C. organizations. But House of Ruth Maryland, which is based in Baltimore and supports domestic violence survivors across the state, cut three clinicians and three attorneys, in part because of the funding shortfall.

"At this point we're triaging," said Lisa Nitsch, chief operating officer of House of Ruth Maryland. "Just at the time when the cost of providing service is higher than ever, is when we're feeling these cuts. And it's detrimental to the people that we serve, and it's detrimental to the people providing the service."

'Safety' at stake

The National Network to End Domestic Violence [says](#) nearly 6,500 organizations across the country rely on the Victims of Crime Act funds as a key funding source. But that pot of money is inconsistent.

This fund, [established](#) by the Victims of Crime Act of 1984, mostly draws from fines paid for federal criminal offenses, as opposed to tax revenue — making it an unpredictable source.

By 2017, the fund [accumulated](#) \$13 billion, of which Congress set a cap of \$2.57 billion on what could be distributed. This amount — far less than the balance in the fund — ensured a large reserve leftover to draw on each year.

But in recent years, the reserve depleted. Advocates are grappling with how to allocate the decreased funding, while bracing for next year.

A coalition of 42 state attorneys generals sent a letter earlier this year to congressional leaders urging lawmakers to pass a short-term funding measure to avoid "devastating consequences for victims of crime." Bipartisan bills have been introduced in the House and Senate to divert funds to help close this gap.

Department of Justice, said in a statement that "keeping the Crime Victims Fund solvent is essential to providing crime victims with compensation and assistance." Rose added that the office joins calls to raise awareness around restoring "the health and vitality" of the fund.

Until the funding gap is filled, there are ripple effects across the country.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence said it [learned](#) that a child and family advocacy center in Arizona was preparing to halve its staffing while legal advocates in Louisiana who help domestic violence survivors could be laid off. In California, a majority of providers [said in a statewide survey](#) that funding cuts would significantly impact the availability of emergency shelters.

“What’s at stake with the [Crime Victims Fund] cuts is safety,” said Stephanie Love-Patterson, president and CEO of the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “These aren’t just the kind of services that are nice to help people. Literally people are coming to our door for their very survival for themselves and also for their children.”

‘What saved me’

Any time a survivor seeks services at Arlington’s human services department, staff refer them to **Doorways**.

Last year, 135 domestic violence survivors stayed in **Doorways’** safe houses — half of whom were children, according to [the organization’s annual report](#). **Doorways’** court advocates helped 360 adults and children navigate the legal system. Twenty-nine survivors relied on a **Doorways** advocate to accompany them to a hospital for a sexual assault or domestic violence forensic exam. Its 24-hour hotline received 1,411 calls last year.

One mother, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for safety reasons, said in an interview she fled to a hotel room with her infant son after repeated abuse by her partner. Then, he showed up outside her door and assaulted her again.

She managed to dial 911. The responding police officer recognized the signs of domestic violence and connected her with a **Doorways** advocate who helped craft an exit plan.

The mother was moved to a furnished apartment. The nonprofit helped her access child care, reenter the workforce and connect with a case manager.

“That’s what saved me,” she said. “I didn’t have anywhere to go.”

Doorways launched a [fundraising campaign](#) this summer that brought in \$100,000. On Oct. 30, **Doorways** is hosting its [annual fundraiser](#) with a goal of raising \$285,000 to bolster services hit by the cuts, including maintaining the apartments.

“We need to keep these services open to save lives,” **Ortiz** said. “There is no waiting time for when a survivor reaches out.”