



# COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION  
DRIVE, ROOM 102A  
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

## SUMMARY REPORT

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**Agenda Date:** 2/11/2025

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**To:** Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

**Department or Agency Name(s):** District Attorney

**Staff Name and Phone Number:** Tatiana Lopez 565-2822 and Shane Lewis 565-3150

**Vote Requirement:** Majority

**Supervisorial District(s):** Countywide

**Title:**

District Attorney Victim Witness Assistance Grant

**Recommended Action:**

Adopt a Resolution to authorize the District Attorney, or their designee, to accept grant award number VW24032301 to continue participation in the California Office of Emergency Services Victim/Witness Assistance Program and accept \$728,943 in grant funding for the term October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025.

**Executive Summary:**

Board approval and authorization is requested to allow the District Attorney (DA) to continue participation in the Victim/Witness Assistance (VWA) Program funded by the California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES), in the amount of \$728,943 for the 2024-25 Federal fiscal year. Funding for this program was at risk for FY24-25 due to a decline in funds available through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). The amount available was unknown prior to approval of the county budget for FY24-25 and contingency funds were set aside to bridge any gap in VOCA funding. The amount budgeted for the VWA program for FY24-25 was \$827,822 and \$98,879 of the set-aside amount is needed to remedy the funding shortfall. Funds will be utilized for 4.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Victim Witness Advocate II positions.

The outlook for VOCA funding beyond this fiscal year is uncertain. No award amount information for FY25-26 is available at this time and may not be known until the State Budget is passed and signed by the Governor. Our State and Federal representatives are aware of the need to continue funding these vital programs. Work to introduce legislation to expand funding sources at the federal level is ongoing, and while the state legislature provided funding to bridge the gaps in federal funding for FFY24-25, it is uncertain if that option will be available, if needed, for FFY25-26.

**Discussion:**

The purpose of this grant is to ensure advocacy is provided to all adult and juvenile crime victims going through the criminal justice system and to connect with victims as soon as possible after a crime has occurred; to reach out and offer services to victims even if the decision is made to not pursue prosecution; to collaborate with law enforcement, community-based organizations, and other victim service organizations to provide a comprehensive response to meeting the needs of crime victims in Sonoma County; and to provide community outreach and training to law enforcement, community-based organizations, and the community at large on the services available to crime victims through the Sonoma County District Attorney's Victim Services

Division.

The District Attorney's Office has participated in the Victim/Witness Assistance Program annually since 1986 and receives an award amount based on available combined State and Federal pass-through funds. The Victim/Witness Assistance grant helps the County of Sonoma meet the victim and witness service mandates under California Penal Code Section §13835 and Marsy's Law under the California Constitution. Funding allows the County of Sonoma to provide crime victims and witnesses access to comprehensive and optional services for all types of crime, whether or not a suspect has been identified or charges have been filed.

These grant funds have historically been utilized to fund up to 5.0 FTE Victim Witness Advocate II positions and 0.5 FTE Senior Victim Witness Advocate in addition to annual Victim Services

team training, mass victimization training, outreach events, cell phone services to support communication with clients, "go bag" items for use in the event of a mass victimization event, other advocacy, and supplies. As a result of reductions in VOCA funding beginning in FY2023-24, the VWA grant is not sufficient to continue to provide the same level of support and will be utilized to fund 4.5 FTE Victim Witness Advocate positions to ensure compliance with providing mandated services and to ensure victims and witnesses of crime continue to receive support from the District Attorney's Office. The impacts of reduced VOCA funding have resulted in the elimination of one program that supported services for foster youth (not renewed for 2024) and another that supported programs for victims of crime (not renewed for 2025) who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless due to their victimization. Positions associated with these programs have been eliminated, shifting the still-existing workload to remaining advocate staff and community based organizations

During the previous one-year grant term, 3,883 new cases were assigned to the Victim Witness Advocate team adding an average of 353 total cases, or seven cases per week, to each advocate caseload. These cases are in addition to 199 cases per advocate that are currently active and were assigned to the advocates prior to October 1, 2023. The case-count per advocate is reduced when a case is closed, however changes in legislation that allow for post-conviction relief may require additional contact with victims that is not reflected in the case-count. Cases referred to Victim Services include cases that are referred by law enforcement that result in criminal charges being filed, as well as cases that are referred and criminal charges are not filed and cases where a suspect has not been identified.

Eleven advocates are assigned to assist victims of crime in our community and provide guidance and support through the various steps of the criminal justice process. While the number of cases assigned to each advocate is a significant measure of caseload, the numbers do not reflect the impact of serious crimes where victims' needs are more complex and require more of the advocates' time. Working with and supporting people who have experienced trauma is rewarding and meaningful, however the stress and exposure to trauma can make the advocate job overwhelming.

The prevalence and severity of domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily attributed to factors like increased isolation, heightened stress levels, economic insecurity, and limited access to support services caused by lockdown measures and stay-at-home orders. Reports of domestic violence significantly increased in 2020 and, despite returning to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, accounted for more than half of the new cases referred to the District Attorney's Office during the previous grant term.

The number of homicide cases referred in FFY2023-24 was slightly lower than the previous year but was still

50% higher than the average of the previous five years. With more than 300 overdose deaths in 2023, a 67% increase over 2022, advocates continued to assist more families who lost a loved one as a result of an overdose in 2024. Death cases are one of the more complex responsibilities in an advocate caseload and a small increase in loss of life cases adds a significant weight to the workload of the advocate team. Felony cases are usually associated with more serious offenses and Victim Services Division has seen an increase in more violent assaults, sexual assaults that include more physical attacks, stalking, and domestic violence that involves strangulation or use of a weapon to create more harm. An increase in severity of juvenile offenses, most notably an increase in sexual assault and attempted homicide, has created a demand for victim services staff at the Juvenile Justice Center (JJC). The JJC is located more than ten miles away from the main courthouse, requiring staff to travel to meet with victims to ensure they receive support and accompaniment to juvenile proceedings. Laws dictating the consequences of serious juvenile offenses often do not compare to the impact that these serious crimes have on survivors/victims and their families, creating additional strain for victim services as support is provided through the criminal justice process.

Legislative changes have impacted the number of inmate requests for early release from imposed sentences, increasing the number of requested hearings and requiring advocates to follow up with the families of the victims of those crimes. Advocates not only have an increase in new cases in their caseload, but they also have multiple resolved cases returning to court that require victim notification and support and court accompaniment. Victims and their families are now having to re-open wounds from crimes that may have occurred many years ago. Before this shift in the law, victims would be able to move on with their lives thinking the perpetrator would be serving a long sentence in prison, but as a result of the early release legislation, families might have to advocate for perpetrators to be denied release. The prevalence of crimes involving guns has increased, potentially as a result in the developments in gun laws and concealed carry, etc. Incidents that may have arisen out of misdemeanor conduct now rise to the level of felonious conduct due to the presence of guns.

As a result of an ever-changing environment, Victim Services has evolved to ensure victims' rights and needs are met. Advocates continue to make services available to victims in our community and have successfully transitioned to providing hybrid support, assisting families and victims appear in court via zoom when the expense of traveling to our county presents a burden for those involved. These changes have affected the role of the Victim Advocate to be more involved after an incident has occurred, many times because we are the one lifeline for victims and advocates often play the role of a case manager. For example, Sonoma County's foremost domestic violence service provider has experienced difficulty retaining staff, leading to a reduction in the services they offer to victims of domestic violence. This has resulted in a reduction of on-site staff at the Family Justice Center who are knowledgeable about community services available and issues facing victims of domestic violence, and has created a hurdle where domestic violence victims/survivors no longer have a true one stop shop for wrap around services. In the last year, victim advocates have had to provide more direct case management support or take the additional steps to ensure a victim is not left alone. With an ever-increasing caseload, advocates are placed in a complicated role, wanting to assist all who seek help, but limited by availability of time and resources.

Five years after the pandemic began, and 19 months after the expiration of the public health emergency, Victim Services continues to address challenges created because of it. Although our division has been successful in recruiting new advocates, other partner agencies and professions have had difficulty filling vacant positions. A shortage of mental health professionals has caused delay in providing immediate counseling to

victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Another challenging situation has been created for victims when legal services are not always available, requiring victims to travel to various locations to obtain services they need, often causing a delay in the preparation of restraining orders.

Victim Services Division anticipates renewal for a third year of the CalOES Unserved/Underserved Victim Advocacy and Outreach (UV) program. This grant was first awarded to the Division in 2023 to improve the delivery of victim services to underserved populations in our county. This project provides an opportunity to create a pathway to better serve farmworkers and other underserved groups who live in our county. The grant provides funds for 1.0 FTE Bilingual Victim Witness Advocate II who has developed relationships with agencies in the community who provide services to this population, developing trust and creating awareness for services available for victims of crime who might not otherwise be willing to report the crime or seek assistance. The work of the UV advocate position will increase in the upcoming years of this project as the Office of the District Attorney works to continue building a relationship of trust to encourage victims to come forward to report wage theft, domestic violence, and other crimes.

Other programs supported by VOCA funding have not been renewed due to significant reduction in available funds. The Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), was part of the Victim Services Division since its inception in 2016 and made services available to unhoused victims of crime in Sonoma County through efforts to shelter unhoused sexual assault victims. HOT was supported by a CalOES grant which, due to shortfalls in VOCA funding, was not renewed for 2025 and Victim Services Division is no longer able to support the advocates from community-based organizations who coordinated services to those most vulnerable in our community. The 1.0 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) HOT Coordinator Time Limited position was not filled after the long-time coordinator resigned in early 2024. The Innovative Response to Marginalized Victims (KI) program which served foster youth who were victims of crime from 2019 through 2023 was not renewed for another 5-year term in anticipation of the reduction in VOCA funding for FFY 2024-25. The KI grant funded 0.5 FTE Senior Victim Witness Advocate who worked directly with this victim population. We were able to utilize VWA funds to fund a portion of that work in 2024, however the reduction in the VWA award for FFY2024-25 eliminates any grant support for the position but the workload remains.

Victim Services hosted its third community resource fair in honor of National Victims' Rights Week in April 2024. More than 45 local partner agencies participated, creating an opportunity for service providers to strengthen connections. In addition to the community resource fair, we partnered with local professionals to host a virtual panel to discuss how to improve services and support provided to victims of crime that honor the whole person. The panel included a victim witness advocate and a prosecutor from the DA's office in addition to representatives from law enforcement, Sonoma County Office of Education, Kashia Pomo Tribal Chairman, and the Executive Director of Verity, the local rape crisis service provider. More than 30 people attended the virtual event including advocates, attorneys, health professionals, and services providers. Over the past year, Victim Services has been increasing outreach to the community including attendance at multiple outreach events such as, La Luz' Cinco de Mayo, Sonoma County Human Race Village, City of Santa Rosa Senior Expo, and National Night out in Petaluma and Santa Rosa.

Victims of crime often suffer emotional, mental and/or material losses. As a society, it is imperative we help mend and restore these citizens to help prevent further harm to them, their families, and their communities. The Advocates provided for under this grant deliver important victim advocacy services, helping victims understand and navigate the criminal justice system and help make their voices heard throughout the

prosecutorial process. They assist with Victim Impact Statements at the end of court proceedings, which is one of greatest tools in helping victims heal. Victim Advocates cannot do the work alone and with challenges from local partner agencies, Victim Services Division is appreciative of continued funding provided by the VWA grant.

The outlook for VOCA funding beyond this fiscal year is uncertain. Our State and Federal representatives are aware of the need to continue funding these vital programs. Work to introduce legislation to expand funding sources at the federal level is ongoing, and while the state legislature provided funding to bridge the gaps in federal funding for FFY24-25, it is uncertain if that option will be available, if needed, for FFY25-26. The work of the Victim Services division needs to continue whether or not VOCA funding is available; we need to continue being a lifeline for those who are seeking help. The work is not done alone as we are just a small piece of the larger part of community services.

**Strategic Plan:**

N/A

**Racial Equity:**

**Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?**

No

**Prior Board Actions:**

The Board of Supervisors has granted approval to accept the Victim/Witness Assistance Program funds every year since 1986. Most recently, on November 28, 2023, the Board approved the acceptance of the Federal Fiscal Year 2023-24 grant in the amount of \$827,222.

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY24-25 Adopted</b>	<b>FY25-26 Projected</b>	<b>FY26-27 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses	\$645,586	\$182,236	
Additional Appropriation Requested			
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$645,586</b>	<b>\$182,236</b>	
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal	\$546,707	\$182,236	
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies	\$98,879		
<b>Total Sources</b>	<b>\$645,586</b>	<b>\$182,236</b>	

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

The FY 2024-25 District Attorney budget includes salary and benefit appropriations as well as grant revenue,

so no additional budget action is required. Funding for this program was significantly reduced for FY2024-25, and the outlook for future funding is not known at this time as it is dependent upon anticipated legislation at both State and Federal levels. In anticipation of the reduction in funding, a contingency of \$401,574 was set aside to ensure the restoration of three Victim Witness Advocate positions, including two funded by this program. A portion of that contingency, \$98,879, is needed to fill the gap in funding for FY2024-25; the balance of the Federal Fiscal Year award will be applied in the first quarter of FY2025-26. The Department's General Fund allocation or internal funds may need to be utilized in future years to cover increases in salary and benefits.

<b>Staffing Impacts:</b>			
<b>Position Title (Payroll Classification)</b>	<b>Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)</b>	<b>Additions (Number)</b>	<b>Deletions (Number)</b>

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

No staffing impacts

**Attachments:**

- Program Resolution
- Grant Award Document

**Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:**

N/A