



Legislation Text

File #: 2022-0973, **Version:** 1

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

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

District Attorney Victim/Witness Assistance Program

Recommended Action:

Adopt a resolution to authorize the District Attorney to sign a contract with the California Office of Emergency Services to continue participation in the Victim/Witness Assistance Program and accept \$827,815 in grant funding for the term October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Executive Summary:

Board approval and authorization is requested to allow the District Attorney to continue participation in the Victim/Witness Assistance Program funded by the California Office of Emergency Services, in the amount of \$827,815.00 for the 2022-23 Federal fiscal year. These grant funds have been accessed by the County since 1986 and are designated to pay for 5.0 full-time equivalent Victim Witness Advocate II positions, 50% of the Senior Victim Witness Advocate, as well as salary and benefits for 500 hours of an Extra Help Victim Advocate II and 770 hours of an Intern. The Senior Victim Advocate and one Advocate are the Mass Victimization Advocates. The grant will also provide funding for an annual Victim Services training, other advocacy and/or mass victimization training, outreach events, cell phone minutes to support communication with clients, "go-bag" items for use in the event of a mass victimization, and supplies.

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 do so 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 comprehensive and optional services to crime victims and witnesses for all types of crime, whether or not a suspect has been identified.

In the past 12 months, Victim Services received over 3,597 referrals, including cases of intimate partner violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and homicide. Ten advocates are assigned to assist victims of crime in our community to provide guidance and support through the various steps of the criminal justice system. So far in 2022, advocate homicide caseloads have doubled. Where a year ago each advocate would carry an average death caseload of three, they now sustain an average of eight death cases. As death cases are one of the more complex responsibilities in an advocate caseload, this increase alone adds a significant burden to the advocate team.

Legislative changes have also impacted the number of inmate requests for early release from imposed sentences, increasing the number of requested hearings and requiring follow up by the advocates 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 that require victim notification and support, and court accompaniment.

As a result of an ever-changing environment, Victim Services has had to evolve to ensure the victims' rights and needs are met. Advocates continue to make services available to victims in our community, including accompaniment to court, and have successfully transitioned to providing hybrid support.

With funds made available through the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP), a much-needed additional advocate position has been funded. During the 2021-2022 fiscal year, Victim Services successfully onboarded four new advocates. Three are bilingual and bicultural and three have already completed the mandatory entry-level advocate training in person. Another of the more senior advocates completed the mandatory Basic Crisis Response training. This training provides advocates information on the potential role their position would play in an event of mass casualty.

Two years after the pandemic began, Victim Services continues to see challenges that have been 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.

The Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) has been a valuable ally at the Family Justice Center Sonoma County where they continue their efforts to shelter unhoused sexual assault victims. Due to COVID outbreaks at local shelters and lack of space in safe houses, victims have fewer options for housing.

Victim Services hosted its first ever community resource fair in honor of National Victims' Rights Week. More than 30 local partner agencies participated, and it gave all service providers an opportunity to rebuild connections. 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 also work closely with the Family Justice Center Sonoma County (FJCSC) to better serve victims of family violence, providing referrals to agencies who can help with housing and financial needs, counseling and medical services, legal assistance, translation and immigration services, and more. Together with FJCSC partners, including YWCA; Verity; Council on Aging; Legal Aid; Catholic Charities; Sonoma County Sheriff's Office; Santa Rosa Police Department; Sonoma County Human Services-Redwood Children's Center; Family, Youth, and Children Services; Adult Protective Services; and Sonoma County Health Services, Advocates ensure that victims obtain the supportive services they need.

Strategic Plan:

N/A

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 March 15, 2022, the Board approved the acceptance of the Federal Fiscal Year 2022-2023 grant in the amount of \$810,189.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 22-23 Adopted	FY23-24 Projected	FY 24-25 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$620,861	\$206,954	
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures	\$620,861	\$206,954	
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal	\$620,861	\$206,954	
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$620,861	\$206,954	

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The current District Attorney budget includes salary and benefit appropriations as well as grant revenue, so no additional budget action is required. Funding for this program has been consistent over the past several years; however, without any increase in grant funding, General Funds may need to be utilized in future years to cover increases in salary and benefits. This grant program has historically required a 25% local match from the General Fund, but the grantor waived the match requirement for FY 2022-2023.

Staffing Impacts:

Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

No Staffing Impacts

Attachments:

Program Resolution

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

Grant Award Document