



VICTIM-WITNESS ASSISTANCE SERVICES

401 3RD AVE N LOWER LEVEL

PH. (406) 315-1111

EXHIBIT 5
DATE 3/26/2013
HB 613

March 25, 2013

RE: HB 613 & Victim Assistance Funding

On behalf of Victim-Witness Assistance Services (VWAS) in Great Falls, I would like to express the importance of funding for our program. We currently operate using VOCA funding distributed through the Montana Board of Crime Control and city and county surcharge funds, when available. Without the VOCA funding, there is no doubt that VWAS would cease to exist. Unlike most other Victim service programs in our state, we are completely separate from any city, county, or law enforcement agency. This means we do not receive any benefits or additional funding that other programs do. Although we do receive City and County Surcharge funds, the amount we receive each year does not even remotely come close to a full year's operating expense. Unfortunately, our VOCA funding continues to decrease as well.

Crime victims should not suffer the loss of exceptional and available services due to lack of funding. It takes very special people to be able to provide direct services and support that VWAS advocates offer. It is not easy to sit at the bedside of a dying child who was beaten with the grieving mother simply to offer support and assure her that we will help her make sure justice is served. It is not easy to sit with a scared woman in the Emergency Room for up to twelve hours who was just raped to provide support and help answer questions through the very intrusive rape kit. It is not easy to meet young children who have been sexually abused for most of their childhood and talk to the non-offending parents about the grueling criminal justice process and how we will be by their side through it all. It is not easy to meet with a repeat domestic violence survivor to apply and reapply for Orders of Protection hoping he or she will finally choose safety. This is what we do – Every day. And not everyone can do these things. Lack of funding means loss of support to some of these people and we cannot choose who is worthy of services – everyone in need should have access to victim services.

Each year, VWAS provides between 13,000-20,000 services to approximately 1500 crime victims. We currently have 356 open files that our advocates are working on to ensure each victim is getting the best possible services, answers, and support. We are also on call 24/7 to respond to crisis situations including homicides, sexual assaults, domestic violence incidents, and child abuse cases. This is done with only three staff members - including the Executive Director. In 2012, we lost \$6,000 in VOCA funding. This decrease hit us pretty hard as we had recently had to relocate to a new building (out of the Great Falls Police Department) and began to incur costs that had been donated in the previous twenty years of our being (rent, printing costs, telephone and internet services, etc). VOCA funding may again decrease this year. If we were to lose any additional funding, I would most likely have to lay off one of my two well-trained, dedicated, and motivated staff members. With such a high case load, VWAS could not adequately function with just the ED and one FTE.

Our program already does so much with so little. Insufficient funding for victim service programs impacts not only our already limited staff and resources, but will have a negative impact on the crime



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victims we are here to serve. VWAS is the only program in our area that is able to provide services such as 24-hour response to crisis situations, court case tracking and notifications, court accompaniment, community outreach and education opportunities surrounding various types of victimizations, and the relationship our program has with law enforcement and the City and County Attorney offices is very strong and some might even say rare.

I hope these words help you to understand the need for our program, programs like our throughout the state, and the importance of funding available to provide victim services for our communities. If you have any questions, please give me a call at the number below or come visit our program and see first-hand what we are offering to our community. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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