

Prepared Testimony of Tiffany Pavone
Director of Victim Services, Child + Family Services
Before the Senate Standing Committee on Social Services
and the Senate Standing Committee on Women's Issues
Hearing on: "Human Services Programs for Domestic Violence Survivors"
Tuesday, October 3, 2023

Chairwoman Persaud, Chairwoman Webb, and Members of the Committees:

My name is Tiffany Pavone, and I am the Director of Victim Services at Child + Family Services in Buffalo, New York. Child + Family Services' programs focus heavily on supporting survivors of domestic violence as we run and operate the only state-licensed, confidential domestic violence shelter in Erie County. As a service provider, member of the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and Chair of the Erie County Coalition Against Family Violence, I deeply appreciate this opportunity to speak before you regarding New York State's human services programs for domestic violence survivors, especially given the fragility of our current continuum of care. In my over twenty years in the victim services field, I have never been more concerned about our safety net for survivors as I am right now. And I know I am not alone.

One of the biggest threats to our critical domestic violence services is our state's funding for these services. Funding for domestic violence survivors and their children and the providers assisting them has been stagnant for far too long and as we continue to see a significant increase in the demand for services, instead of increasing or maintaining that funding, agencies and families across the state must prepare for drastic cuts. Cuts that will shutter the doors of shelters, leave hotline calls unanswered, and leave survivors and their children without the resources needed to live safely. There are many reasons why a domestic violence survivor will return to the abuse. We have all heard it, it takes on average 7-8 attempts before a survivor permanently leaves their abuser. With the state of current funding, that average will inevitably increase. We as providers, as well as the State, should not be adding to their danger, adding to their trauma, and being another reason they return to the abuse.

Since 2018, New York's Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) assistance grants – the grants provided to victim service providers around the state decreased by \$136 million. Similarly, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding earmarked in the New York State Budget for non-residential domestic violence services has increased by only 7% since its initial appropriation more than 20 years ago. Despite the decreases providers have already barely managed to endure we are now being told that we are likely to see a full year of funding on our most recent Office of Victim Services contract eliminated, despite having been awarded a full 3-year contract. How are we supposed to function, plan and support survivors when we cannot financially plan for our future? And time is of the essence as our third year begins October 2024.

These continued cuts come as we continue to see an increase in the demand for our services. A demand that spiked during the pandemic but has not relented.

As a result, domestic violence service providers cannot retain staff nor hire new staff as quickly as current staff is leaving. They are leaving because the funding makes it impossible to pay them a living wage. These jobs are not for the faint of heart and not for those who are not committed to providing effective, trauma-informed support to survivors. Yet even those committed to the work are unable to stay because they cannot support their own families. How do we ask trained advocates to remain and continue to subject themselves to the vicarious trauma and stress that comes with these positions when we are subjecting them to additional trauma as they worry about paying their bills and feeding their own families? And when local fast-food restaurants can pay more – agencies, my own included, lose skilled social workers and clinicians to these other less traumatizing positions. Further still, once these positions become vacant, it takes months, sometimes even more than a year, to fill them.

The living wage issue then impacts survivors. The staff that remain to do the work are trying to assist even more clients at once; advocates in our program as well as several other local programs have seen a minimum increase of 50% on their caseloads. This is unsustainable and ineffective. Survivors know this because their advocate, who they have been able to rely on in the past, the person that they have built a trust with and can turn to when an order of protection is violated, or an offender is being threatening, or who has chosen to take the most dangerous step of fleeing the home, hasn't been there or is tied up with another client and are unable to return their call. So many times we have just that one opportunity to help and with these vacancies due to funding I fear just how many opportunities to help we are missing.

I cannot tell you what it feels like to call a survivor to let them know they have been re-assigned to another advocate. The inevitable questions follow: will the new advocate have time for me; how many clients do they have on their case load? I even took a call from a client who just wanted to be certain that with her impending criminal court hearing in a few months that I could guarantee that her advocate would still be around? Sadly, my answer has been that unfortunately I can't. This client knew the staffing crisis that agencies were experiencing because of lack of funding and wanted to find out if she too would be a casualty. Once again, the service providers who should be part of the solution are just another reason to return or remain in the abuse.

Reduced funding and the resulting staffing crisis are unfortunately not the only issues. Even the current funding we receive is not paid in a timely manner. For shelters, we submit for state funding through our local Department of Social Services. The vouchers we submit monthly and in a timely manner are never paid in the same timely manner. Our shelter, as well as several other shelters across the state, are still waiting on months of payments. This is our main source of funding to be able to provide safe shelter for survivors. Large agencies like ours have had to turn to lines of credit to be able to front the funds until we finally receive payment. However, smaller shelters are not able to do so and have had to close their doors. Perhaps if we cut down on the

administrative oversight of these funds and worked directly with the state, we would not only have additional funding available, but would receive the funding in time to pay our bills and keep our shelters afloat.

Also, shelters are currently only reimbursed for the number of beds being occupied. This system of reimbursement does not take into consideration the fact that despite whether we are at capacity every day, we must be fully staffed and maintain ratio for a fully occupied shelter every day. We still have the expense regardless of whether every bed is slept in each night. Our staffing expense remains the same regardless of the number of residents in the building, the utility bills are the same, the security and safety measures are the same – so why shouldn't the funding reimbursement be? The current funding structure creates an inevitable shortfall in our funding that can easily be remedied by allowing shelters to be reimbursed at full capacity.

At a time when our services are in more demand, providers should be considering the programs and supports that we can add to our programs to assist survivors. Residents in our shelter could benefit from having on-site mental health clinicians. But any such assistance is an impossibility with the current funding situation. Right now, service providers are doing their best to provide the basics and be able to do so in a truly safe and trauma informed manner.

I thank the Committees again for the ability to provide both oral and written testimony today. The ability to be at these hearings and express the concerns of not only myself, but my fellow colleagues in the field, is encouraging. I ask the Committees to help us reassure the survivors in our State that we are all invested in their safety and that we have not forgotten about them or given up on them. I think about the survivor whose call for help goes unanswered or who is left to traverse the intimidating and trauma inducing criminal justice system on their own and I feel like we as a community have failed, especially when all we need to do is pay the individuals doing this work the living wage they deserve and that others in the human service field receive.

Thank you again for your time.