

Dear distinguished government officials,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today about a critical issue that affects countless lives in our community: domestic violence. My name is Christine Battisti and I am the Executive Director of the Crime Victims Assistance Center, Inc. located in Broome County. I have worked at crime victims for the past 20 years starting out as an advocate working in our Child Advocacy Center. I have encountered thousands of victims over the years and sometimes can't believe some of the things I see even after all this time. At the age of 40 I made a decision to pursue a master's degree in public administration so that I may be put in positions like I am today standing before you to advocate for increased funding for victim services to support those who have experienced domestic violence and who mostly likely do not have the support systems many of us are afforded.

The Crime Victims Assistance Center is comprehensive victim service provider that is available 24/hr. 7 days a week. I want to pause with that statement to make it clear that we never close. Before the pandemic, during the pandemic and post pandemic. We remain open, which takes money, time and compassion on all of the staff at CVAC. All of our services are free and confidential they include legal advocacy, which helps victims navigate both family and criminal court systems. Counseling, that funders have increasingly put demands on the qualifications of the type of counseling we need to provide, hospital accompaniment with those victims that find themselves in the ER from sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse. We house two child advocacy centers both in Broome and Chenango County that work within a multidisciplinary team that reduces trauma for children and hopefully increases the rate of prosecution with children that have been sexually abused, seriously physically abused or those who have witnessed violence. We also have an education and outreach team that provides

trainings to schools, professionals and the community. In addition we have office space on Binghamton University Campus providing support to students and faculty. We also train volunteers to man a 24/hr. 7 days a week crisis line.

I was asked today to speak as to what we are seeing and I find it difficult to even put into words. On average we see over 500 kids a year, and over a thousand adults. I would like to share with you just a few of the recent tragedies that have so greatly impacted our community.

April 19th

A man and a woman were found dead Wednesday in what authorities said was a murder-suicide in the village of Windsor.

The Broome County Sheriff's Department said male 53, of Windsor, strangled his ex-girlfriend, 47-year-old.

Victim had filed and was granted an order of protection last month, deputies said, adding that an investigation found the two people had "a history of several unreported domestic disputes over the course of their relationship."

June 14th

Troopers responded to a property on Popple Hill Road just after 3 p.m. Tuesday, and discovered two deceased individuals. Preliminary results of the ongoing investigation show a 36-year-old female, intentionally caused the death of her 7-year-old son before taking her own life. Another Murder Suicide.

June 26th,

Around 5:15 a.m., Broome County Sheriff's Deputies and Emergencies Medical Services responded to a report that an adult female and female infant had been shot with a crossbow at a home located on State Route 41 near Cass Road.

According to the sheriff's office, the initial investigation showed that male 26, of Nineveh, NY got into an argument with his wife and fired a crossbow while she was holding their three-week-old daughter. The broad head crossbow bolt hit the child in the upper torso, exiting the armpit before striking the woman in the chest. The infant was killed.

August 26th.

BINGHAMTON, N.Y. – (WIVT/WBGH) Following an investigation into the fire that took place at 56 Howard Avenue on Saturday, police have identified the victims of an apparent murder-suicide.

The investigation determined that the husband shot his wife multiple times before starting the fire. He later shot himself inside of the home.

In addition to these, I need to highlight that our community has had 8 child fatalities so far this year and I had a phone call with a colleague at cps who was in tears saying "if one more person leaves I do not know what we are going to do"

These are just few stories of what the staff are experiencing. Not only are we only having to witness and work with families of homicides, we are expected to meet the ever demanding needs of victims that have increased dramatically. We are seeing more victims with increased mental health needs, substance abuse and housing. Answering the phone last month I encountered a victim who was trying to escape a domestic violence situation where she was living in a camper

in the woods with no running water and I had no options for her. Shelters are full, we need more resources.

We have had over 20 new staff added to CVAC over the past few years and this is the highest turnover in the history of the organization. I know that our agency is not alone as we sit on statewide calls hearing the burden that has been placed upon us leaders. We recently completed a staff survey and the results over and over again state the same concern, “I love this work, but I can’t survive on this salary”. I would like to point out in 2003 when I was hired, my pay was 12/ hour. Today, twenty years later advocates make 17/hr. That is only a five dollar increase in twenty years and it’s unacceptable.

In 2021, CVAC experienced over a 250,000 budget cut from office of victim services. I had no choice but to cut an entire department which consisted of a full time attorney and paralegal that was recently added to help victims specifically with family court and civil matters. And now we are hearing that we may be facing another cut next year.

We continue to work with less although crime continues to climb. This is why we need to work as efficiently as possible. State agencies need to communicate and work together to help non – profits as they function under complex funding streams. There is need for reform with our contracts and databases. Just as an example CVAC’s 2 million dollar agency has 17 funding streams all with different fiscal years, all with funders creating different rules on how items can be claimed, and how often we can make changes to our budgets. To most importantly not being fiscally responsible by forcing spenddowns instead of using unspent funds to be saved for when cuts come down the pipe. We actually get penalized when we have vacancies not only in our agencies by having less workers to do the jobs and overworked employees but then again by losing these funds. This year I had to take out a line of credit for the first time to cover payroll

because reimbursements through the state funders were significantly delayed. I purpose we start looking at how to streamline and make revisions within our funders so we can spend less time on contract management and more on our programs and service delivery.

As I selfishly want to advocate for victims & service providers it would be wrong if I did not include my plea for increased funding for offender accountability programs. In our county we have one therapist currently doing this work with zero funding. If we truly want to reduce domestic violence we need programs in every community. These program can help by:

Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Offender accountability programs are designed to target the root causes of domestic violence, such as anger management issues, substance abuse, and learned behaviors. By addressing these issues, we have the potential to break the cycle of violence and prevent further abuse within families.

Protecting Victims: Effective accountability programs can provide a measure of safety for victims by ensuring that abusers are held responsible for their actions. When abusers are held accountable, victims are less likely to experience further violence.

Reducing Recidivism: Research shows that offender accountability programs can effectively reduce the likelihood of reoffending. This not only saves lives but also reduces the burden on our criminal justice system and taxpayer resources.

In conclusion, domestic violence is a pervasive and deeply troubling issue that demands our attention and resources. By increasing funding for victim services, we can provide immediate support to survivors, prevent future violence through education and awareness programs, and alleviate the economic burden on our society. In our community we are currently working on partnering with Law Enforcement to implement the lethality assessment screening tool, which

places victims of domestic violence in contact with an advocate right at the scene of the crime. This program can save lives, but we cannot continue to add more responsibility on the staff without an increase. We have a moral duty to protect the most vulnerable among us and to create a society where domestic violence is not tolerated.

I beg you to consider the lives at stake, the families torn apart, and the communities affected by domestic violence. Let us stand together and invest in the future, a future free from domestic violence, by allocating the necessary funding to bolster victim services. It is a small investment with potentially life-saving impacts. I fear if we do not make some type of drastic changes as to how our programs are funded, you will continue to see these professionals leave this work, leaving crime and it's wrath to plaque our community's. This truly is a health crisis. Thank you again for holding this hearing and listening to our concerns...

Sincerely,

Christine Battisti, MPA

Executive Director of the Crime Victims Assistance Center, Inc

