

State must support domestic violence survivors

In 2022, domestic violence claimed 96 lives in Wisconsin. That's one death every 3.8 days, and a 20% increase from 2021.

This is unacceptable and completely avoidable. We have the power to protect survivors and prevent domestic violence.

As a champion for survivors of domestic violence, I know we can do more to aid in the prevention of horrific abuse towards women, children and other marginalized groups in our community. While our state sits on a nearly \$4 billion surplus, we have the funds to make violence against women and others preventable, treatable and prosecutable. Most importantly, we know that we will save lives.

While no piece of legislation can ever erase the trauma of violence, no one should experience barriers to justice and support during the most difficult times of their lives. It is the role of the government to step up and provide for a safer, more compassionate path so that people can heal — so that victims become survivors.

Together with Sen. Jesse James, R-Altoona, Rep. Sun Conley, D-Janesville, and Rep. Patrick Synder, R-Schofield, I introduced legislation to fund victim services and domestic violence services in Wisconsin at the level previously proposed by Gov. Tony Evers, giving the state Legislature one more opportunity to do the right thing. The legislation would also provide grants to Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) that provide multidisciplinary approaches to investigating child abuse while also working with law enforcement to interview child victims in a friendly manner and environment.

Concerns about funding for services that address domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect, and sexual abuse for children are prevalent in the discussions that I've had with local law enforcement. They rely on these essential survivor and victim services to assist in providing care and compassion to those affected.

Most service providers historically obtained their funding through the federal Victims of Crime Act Fund (VOCA). This fund receives the fees and fines from victims' federal court cases. However, the federal Department of Justice recently announced that Wisconsin could expect a nearly 40% drop in funding in 2024. This is unacceptable to the victims of terrible crimes that need help in our state.

Wisconsin's Office of Crime Victim Services said the drop in funding this year would only allow for 52 of the current 135 VOCA programs statewide to receive necessary support. Decreasing access to victim services will lead our state backwards and harm those dealing with the trauma of domestic or sexual abuse.

This is why it is so important that we increase funding for the Wisconsin Department of Justice to award grants to organizations that provide services to victims of sexual assault. It will also increase grants awarded from the Department of Children and Families to organizations that provide domestic violence services and increases funding contracts to CACs. The bill provides funding for a new CAC in Ozaukee County to increase access to support for survivors of child abuse.

Conversations about domestic and sexual violence are difficult, but we must take meaningful steps to protect Wisconsin's victims and survivors while preventing future violence. With comprehensive legislation, we can create a safer Wisconsin, where violators and assailants are held accountable, services are available for victims to become survivors and where every survivor is heard and believed.

Wisconsin's victims and survivors deserve better.