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Domestic violence center is in the balance

While state legislators continue to battle over a budget, one local nonprofit organization is fearing the worst.

The Domestic Violence Center of Santa Clarita Valley stands to lose almost half its funding if the state decides to go through with massive budget cuts.

The center has an annual operating budget of about \$450,000, Executive Director Nicole Shellcroft said. About \$200,000 of that budget is state-provided, with another \$80,000 in funding from Los Angeles County.

The center has a staff of seven full-time employees, two part-time workers and served more than 1,000 people in 2008, Shellcroft said. It offers an emergency shelter for women and their children, a 24-hour hotline, women's support groups, crisis intervention, individual counseling, children's therapy, legal service referrals, a court-approved batterer's program and community education.

"We'd be pretty hard hit," she said of the possibility of cuts in state funding. "This is kind of like getting the rug pulled out from under you."

Already this year, she said the center has responded to the recession with a reduction in staff hours.

If funding is slashed even further, Shellcroft said the center would have to respond by ramping up fundraising and likely cutting back on some services.

The center typically receives its funding in late summer, Shellcroft said.

For example, on Wednesday Shellcroft was preparing to submit to the state her review of the center's 2008-09 fiscal year, for 25 percent of the year's funding. The other 75 percent comes at the end of the summer.

"I'm waiting essentially for \$200,000 to come all around the same time," she said. "We're in limbo whether or not we're going to get any money."

If state Controller John Chiang indeed begins sending out \$3.3 billion in IOUs today, Shellcroft said receiving one could be a ray of hope.

"If we get an IOU it tells us we'll get something," she said.

The IOUs are necessary because California doesn't have enough incoming tax revenue

to meet all its payment obligations. If the budget impasse drags into August, the state would have to issue another \$4 billion in IOUs.

The state's Domestic Violence Program functions under the heading of the Department of Public Health, funding 94 shelters and centers throughout California.

The possibility of slashed funding paints a dire picture, said Tara Shabazz, executive director of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence.

"A complete elimination would definitely endanger domestic-violence (programs)," she said.

The governor's original proposal was to cut all \$20.4 million for the Domestic Violence Program. Still on the table is the proposal to cut that budget by 20 percent.

State funding makes up 30 percent of the funding for half the domestic-violence programs in California, Shabazz said.

The most immediate response to funding cuts, she said, will likely be reductions in services and staff hours — a crippling stroke for 24-hour shelters.

"Domestic violence happens 24 hours a day," Shabazz said. "We want to make sure that they're not just able to access these services but able to rebuild their lives."

It's not only in the arena of state funding where domestic-violence centers stand to suffer.

With the nation in the throes of a recession, Shabazz said there has been a marked decrease in charitable giving — a foundational funding source for nonprofit groups.

That crunch was evident last month, after the local Domestic Violence Center hosted its "Boys Night Out" fundraiser at the home of City Councilman Bob Kellar.

The event raised \$9,000, down from \$13,500 in 2008, said Gail Ortiz, a board member for the center.

"It is beyond huge, it's crushing," she said of the challenges facing domestic-violence centers. "You're talking about shutting down a whole network."

The center has an annual fundraising golf tournament set for next month, and Shellcroft said the center is planning a major donor campaign for October, which is Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Despite much trepidation about the future, Shabazz still sees a bright side.

"Domestic-violence programs started with no funding," she said, pointing to the role of community volunteers.

Additionally, she said there is hope for federal funding.

"We are really in a good time to leverage some federal dollars," she said. "There is some hope in (the new administration)."

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