

County Attorney's office gets large grant to help domestic violence victims for second year

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | February 14, 2018 5:02 pm

On any given day, dozens of people might seek help from the Domestic Violence Intake Center at the Louis D. Brandeis Hall of Justice downtown.

The center at 600 West Jefferson St. is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, staffed by the Office of the Circuit Court Clerk, the Jefferson County Attorney's Office and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department.

Victim advocates like Cammie Sizemore are on staff as well. She alone might see five to 15 people in the office a day, but makes 20 to 25 calls a day on behalf of victims, the office says.

Sizemore specializes in victims who are at the highest level of danger. Already this year, domestic violence has contributed to seven of the city's first 10 murders, according to the Jefferson County Attorney's office.

The office has received a large grant from the [National Victims of Crime Act](#) for the second year in a row to help victims of domestic violence.

The grant, for \$152,450, is a threefold increase in the money distributed from the federal agency in previous years.

Sizemore said the increase in the VOCA grant has made a huge impact on the county's ability to prosecute domestic violence cases.

"It changed everything," she said.

Until 2017, the grants were for \$50,000 annually, which paid for one victim

advocate position and support services. Jefferson County Attorney Mike O'Connell said he pushed for last year's increase and added two new positions with the additional funds, including one whose sole focus is victims at a high risk of being killed.

The County Attorney's Office has two other advocates whose salaries are paid for with funds allocated from the department. The advocates work day and night shifts at the intake center to see victims 24 hours a day.

According to the **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence**, on average, 20 people are physically abused by intimate partners every minute in the United States, which equals more than 10 million abuse victims a year. One in three women and one in four men have been physically abused by an intimate partner.

Between July 2013 and June 2014, **Kentucky** programs sheltered 3,295 victims of abuse and their children, and 40 percent of these were children.

In a single day in Kentucky in 2014, 10 percent of people seeking services were turned away due to lack of resources.

Jefferson County Attorney Mike O'Connell hopes providing these services will help slow that trend.

“This second straight award of increased funding demonstrates the expertise and support we provide to victims of domestic violence,” he said in a news release. “The continuation of these additional federal dollars cements my office's commitment to domestic violence victims at the greatest risk of deadly abuse.”

A one-stop shop

The Domestic Violence Intake Center at the Louis D. Brandeis Hall of Justice | Courtesy of the Jefferson County Attorney's Office

In 2009, the **Domestic Violence Intake Center** was relocated to an expanded space of about 2,500 square feet. Before the expansion, victims seeking help would have to visit the intake center then go to another office to file an emergency protective order.

Now, all the services are in one place, including circuit court clerks who type up the protective orders for victims, and there is a small space in the office for Louisville Metro Police to interview victims. The waiting room for victims is large and secure, and has a TV and toys for when victims have to bring their children with them.

The money for the grants from VOCA comes from fines, forfeited bail bonds, penalties and special assessments collected by federal courts, U.S. Attorneys' office and federal prisons.

Since 2014, the Domestic Violence Unit in the Jefferson County Attorney's Office says it has prosecuted nearly 12,000 domestic violence and sexual assault cases, earning a 90.7 percent conviction rate. Nearly 40 members of O'Connell's staff are involved with domestic violence cases on a daily basis.

In 2017, advocates from the Domestic Violence Intake Center served 5,500 victims. Additional VOCA funds are used for things like training, equipment and telephone interpreter services. In 2015, DVIC advocates used interpreter services to support 197 victims with limited English proficiency.

Victim advocacy

At the intake center, victims are assessed to determine their risk of further violence.

Sizemore, who specializes in victims who are at the highest level of danger, said she uses a risk assessment tool to determine each victim's level of risk based on the types of attacks they have endured or their personal circumstances.

For example, she said, victims who have suffered strangulation are at much higher risk for being killed by their partner than those who haven't. Those who are pregnant or have recently given birth are also at a high risk for being murdered, she added.

Jeff Metzmeier, prosecutor and division chief of the Domestic Violence Intake Center, said the tool also helps prosecutors in criminal cases.

“Unfortunately, sometimes the victim will recant. And we have information

from the victim and how scared they were at the time they first saw us. We use that oftentimes to set bond or make arguments for bond.” Louisville Metro Police use a similar tool to assess victims in the field.

Sizemore said the tool really helps her and other advocates understand the situation.

“Sometimes the incident that brought the person here is not as dramatic as the risk assessment shows, so you kind of have to draw out what’s going on,” she said.

“I look at the (attacker’s) criminal history, and I see that the person has been charged multiple times for violence against this victim, and that kind of changes the picture of what I’m looking at. So, I’ll work with the police to provide a stepped-up patrol in the victim’s area, so when they can, they’ll do paperwork (in their cars) in that area, ride by multiple times with their lights off, be aware of the perpetrator’s habits, if he’s got an arrest warrant or protective order.”

It helps Sizemore and police protect the victim a little more and respond faster to subsequent incidents, she added.

Sizemore will also work to try to find a safe place for the victim to stay, such as a friend or family member’s house or at one of the local women’s shelters. The office works closely with the Center for Women and Families as well as the University of Louisville’s forensic nurses. The nurses document evidence of domestic and sexual violence, helping prosecutors make stronger cases against attackers.

Due to a change in law in 2016, victims who need a protective order but don’t live with or have children with their abusers can now get an interpersonal protective order, or IPO. Because of this, the DVIC has seen more cases of victims in same-sex partnerships, as well as teenagers who may be victims of someone in their school.

The grant's impact

Having more victim advocates allows the advocates and prosecutors to spend more time with the victims and process cases faster, Metzmeier said. "I feel like we're making better cases," he said. "I do feel like we're getting more cases, but our clients were already coming. I think what we see is less victims getting frustrated and walking away."

Because criminal cases take time, victims can often get discouraged with the process and give up.

"We try to keep people engaged, and what I've noticed is we can keep people more engaged as we have a greater number of advocates," Metzmeier said. "We can encourage them to stay. If they have to go pick up their kids, 'Go pick up your kids and bring them back. We'll hold onto your paperwork.' We don't want them to leave without getting those services."

Sizemore again praised the increase in the VOCA grant for helping the center's efforts. "I think it's safe to say that Kentucky doesn't get a lot of credit for being on the cutting edge of anything, but we here in Louisville, we are at the cutting edge of prosecution and how we handle these cases. There's nowhere else in the state where you can talk to an advocate when you file a protective order."

She added that there are very few places in the United States that have access to forensic nurses to help victims.

The impact domestic violence has on a community is severe. According to the **National Child Traumatic Stress Network**, children who grow up in a home where there's violence often become victims or abusers as adults, or they can have behavior or emotional problems into adulthood. Metzmeier and Sizemore said they have seen this effect in the families they've worked with.

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