

# The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

## LOCAL NEWS

### Rape crisis centers under threat: Budget cuts hamper services, official says

By Peter Reuell / News Staff Writer

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With a serial rapist stalking MetroWest streets, Linda Standley would normally spring into action.

The assistant director of the rape prevention program at the Wayside Trauma Intervention Service, based in Milford, Standley should be on the phone to police, offering to counsel victims, or organizing events to raise awareness of the attacks and how to thwart the attacker.

So far, though, none of that has happened.

Because of state budget cuts that slashed nearly two-thirds of program funding, Standley and other crisis center directors say they're barely able to keep the organizations afloat, let alone offer help in the high-profile attacks.

"It's worse than I've ever seen it, and I've been doing this work since 1989," Standley said. "Because of state budget cuts, essentially we lost about 50 percent of our funding."

Normally, she said, the center operates on an annual budget of just over \$200,000. Budget cuts sliced some \$85,000 from that total.

Standley's center, however, may be one of the lucky ones.

The state's family health services account, which includes items like poison control hotlines, family planning and rape crisis centers, was level-funded at \$11 million in Gov. Mitt Romney's budget.

By the time the budget emerged from the Legislature, however, the account had been slashed back to just \$2.8 million, forcing the 19 centers in the state to absorb a crippling 67 percent cut.

To make up the disparity, Romney asked legislators to include funding for the centers in the 2003 deficiency budget. The request was voted down this week.

Although rumors on Beacon Hill persist of a coming 2004 supplemental budget, "the ball is in the Legislature's court right now," Romney spokesperson Nicole St. Peter said yesterday.

"The governor recognizes it's a critical need in the commonwealth, and filed for full funding to ensure these services exist for women," she said.

But unless more funding is found, Standley and other directors said, the services may not be around for long.

At Voices Against Violence, a Framingham program that offers services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, officials estimate they can only handle about five cases at any one time, just one-fifth of their former capacity.

"It's all we can do right now. It's pretty dramatic," Director Mary Gianakis said.

Before the cuts, the program was staffed with 2 1/2 full-time counselors and a full-time outreach worker, she said. Today, it has been pared down to a single counselor and outreach worker, both of whom work half-time, or 20 hours a week .

"It's huge," Gianakis said of the cuts. "We want the community to know we can still be there for them, but certainly our availability to do things like going to the hospital at 3 o'clock in the morning is just nonexistent."

"What's happened is we have scaled back significantly on what we've been doing," agreed Janice Pothier Pac, director of women's services at Attleboro-based New Hope.

Like Voices Against Violence, the center had to lay off several staff members -- they've gone from more than four full-time employees to less than two. At one point, Pothier Pac said, the center had no counseling staff.

The center also had to drop a service offering counseling to victims during hospital examinations after attacks, as well as reporting attacks to police, and may even have to start putting those seeking help on a waiting list, she said.

Outreach and education programs will also be scaled back.

Most troubling, Pothier Pac said, is her belief that the cuts will discourage victims from coming forward.

"If, when somebody finally makes the attempt (to come forward), and they find out services were cut, I think it makes it harder for people to come forward and ask for that help," she said. "It's hard enough for people to come forward in the best case. Given all these other factors, it's going to make it much harder for people to report."

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