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SC rape and violence crisis centers face crisis of their own if federal funding goes away

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Tosha Connors, CEO of My Sister's House, pictured June 28, 2024, discussed how federal funding cuts could impact the non
GRACE BEAHM ALFORD/STAFF

Organizations across South Carolina that support survivors of domestic and sexual violence are already strapped for cash, and now they face uncertainty as directives from the Trump administration to freeze federal funding leave many in a frenzy.

On Feb. 11, a federal appeals court **denied an administration request** to reinstate a freeze on federal funding the president initiated in late January, after a lower court judge found the administration still withheld some funding after the freeze **was temporarily blocked**.

For some nonprofits, certain funding stopped flowing and has yet to be disbursed. While losing federal dollars is currently only a potential threat for others, the uncertainty is still a cause for concern.

Organizations helping survivors of domestic and sexual violence and preventing such acts across **the country saw grants** from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's **Rape Prevention and Education Program** held up without explanation in the midst of the funding confusion.

Multiple groups in South Carolina receive funds from the program, including **Tri-County S.P.E.A.K.S.** in the Lowcountry. **Deb Freel, the organization's executive director**, said that their prevention specialist is funded by grants provided through the program.

"It's a person whose sole purpose is to work with communities to identify where the challenges are around sexual violence and work to end it," Freel said.

Despite the court-ordered stay on the funding freeze, Freel was told the S.C. Department of Public Health would not be releasing the funding, ultimately leading the organization to a difficult decision.

"Do we let our person go, or do we use alternate funds in order to support her salary?" Freel said, adding they were able to pay her salary with other funds but weren't sure how long that could last.

The Julie Valentine Center, a sexual assault and child abuse recovery center in Greenville, also saw a \$36,000 grant from the CDC's program paused. CEO Shauna Galloway-Williams said they had to make a similar decision about a staff position that was mostly funded by the grant.



The Julie Valentine Center in Greenville is pictured on Sept. 14, 2023. The center provides free and confidential services, including therapy for sexual assault and child abuse survivors. Henry Taylor/Staff

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The center continued providing the services covered by the rape education grant, with the hope that they will be reimbursed if the funding is made available again. They're buoyed by three months of reserve funds and a line of credit — a level of support that other rape crisis centers might not have.

Casey White, a spokesperson for state DPH, confirmed to The Post and Courier that the Rape Prevention and Education grant to the state — totaling \$668,517 — was supposed to start its second year in a five-year grant cycle on Feb. 1. It has been delayed by the CDC.

DPH is "awaiting further guidance from federal agencies on when or if the funds will be released," he said, acknowledging that crisis centers in the state are making difficult decisions based on the situation.

White noted that DPH has not received any information about changes in funding through the **Sexual Assault Services Program**, which is currently in the middle of its annual cycle and is set to be re-issued in August. He added that "all projects funded by this grant continue to progress."

Uncertainty of future funding

Freel was in Washington, D.C., for training on a grant her organization received from the Department of Justice's **Office of Violence Against Women** when she first heard about the funding freeze in January.

"It's a big deal that we're an awardee for that, one of only six sites in the country. Yet when that came through, all of us who had traveled there, both then and presently, are concerned about what that bodes for that grant," she said. "Even though we have received our notice of award, the funding has not yet been released, because it's still early on in that grant process."

Freel noted the potential freeze created uncertainty around whether the group could hire and train a staff member the grant would pay for. But she said the bigger issue is the organization's operational budget, which is funded in large part by federal grants — roughly 60 percent, or \$370,000 annually.

She noted that her organization lost \$61,000 in Victims of Crime Act, or VOCA, funding last year and had to lay off its outreach coordinator.

Tosha Connors, CEO of My Sister's House, said that she was told by the state Attorney General's Office that VOCA and Violence Against Women Act funding were "safe right now." She said the funding freeze memo, followed by its rescission and then partial implementation, was creating "competing messages about what is or isn't happening."

"It's making an already stressful environment even more stressful for the staff and for the clients," Connors said.



Tosha Connors, CEO of My Sister's House, is pictured in the nonprofit's donation center June 28, 2024.

GRACE BEAHM ALFORD/STAFF

In many cases, the federal grants are reimbursements for services already provided and staff already hired.

Sara Barber, executive director of the **S.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault**, said after work is done, organizations typically submit an invoice to the agency facilitating the grant to get repaid.

"When that initial memo came out, we were unsure whether we were going to get reimbursed for work that had already been done. And we have contracts with the federal government to do this work," Barber said. "For a long time, both the federal and state governments have relied on nonprofits and non-governmental organizations to provide these services, and suddenly we were in a position where we didn't know whether we would get paid for work that we've done."

'We can't do more with less'

Connors stressed that My Sister's House is committed to helping any domestic violence survivor that reaches out and that client safety and confidentiality remains the core mission. Still, **prior funding cuts** and uncertainty about future grants are making the work more difficult, she said.

"We're already underfunded. We are already told to do more with less," she said. "We can't do more with less. It's not possible."



Stacks of clothing donated to Tri-County S.P.E.A.K.S. sit on the shelves to be put together for sexual assault survivors leaving a forensic examination, Oct. 3, 2024, in Charleston.

HENRY TAYLOR/STAFF

Connors said between \$700,000 and \$800,000 of her organization's funding comes from federal grants. According to data from 2024, My Sister's House answered 1,459 calls on its crisis line — ranging from around 30 minutes to almost two hours — and provided therapy for almost 2,000 people. The nonprofit also housed 301 people last year, just over half of which were children.

Connors said since 2020 cuts to VOCA funding have added up to roughly \$300,000 in lost grant money. She added the lost funding could house 200 clients in emergency shelter for a year or fund up to three additional therapists.

For **Sistercare**, a nonprofit in Cayce that serves domestic violence survivors in the Midlands, a loss of funding could be the difference between life and death. CEO Leah Wicevic expressed concern about the possibility of losing federal funding, which accounts

for 75 percent of their \$4.4 million budget.

The group provides services for over 4,000 domestic violence survivors and their children every year free of charge across five counties. In 2024, they received 2,922 calls and reached 17,711 individuals through their services.

To lose over \$3 million in federal funding will have both a community and economic impact, Wicevic said, as it helps support their emergency shelters, crisis line, teen outreach education and housing and advocacy programs.

"If we lost that money, it would be detrimental," Wicevic said. "To go backwards from all this progress — of even just breaking the stigma of domestic violence and talking about it, and more survivors coming forward and sharing their stories and receiving services — is devastating."

While the organization has money saved, it is not enough to carry out their services in the long run if funding were to stop.

According to Barber, the coalition's 22 member organizations across the state receive between 50 and 88 percent of their funding from the federal government.

The coalition itself, she said, would lose up to 80 percent of its funding if the freeze were long-term. She said the loss would impact services like connecting survivors with attorneys at not cost and training provided to member organizations, law enforcement and communities for services.

"That would all be gone," she said. "I don't think people really have a firm conception of the wide level of damage that this would do to services that they expect to be there in a time of desperation and need."

Butch Kennedy, who leads the **Palmetto Hope Network**, said a funding loss would be a "no-win situation" for victims of domestic and sexual violence in South Carolina and beyond.

"This is not just South Carolina. This is nationwide. And to me, it just hits home, just thinking of how much more difficult it is going to be for all these service providing organizations to continue to do what they do," Kennedy said.

Freel said she hopes people will take action to support these organizations and the work that they do, whether it be contacting their congressional representatives to express support for federal funding or making donations if they are able.

"If folks have the wherewithal to support our organization, we will need partners in order to potentially offset what may happen if the government decides to freeze or eliminate this funding."

Spencer Donovan and April Santana contributed to this report.

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