

Testimony of Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment, Inc. (DC SAFE) (1/3)

Budget Oversight Hearing - Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants

Committee on Public Safety & the Judiciary - April 25th, 2024

Good morning Chairperson Pinto and members of the committee,

My name is Natalia Otero. I am the Co-Founder of DC SAFE. We serve an average of 12,000 survivors of Domestic Violence a year. We specialize in providing expedited services to the 1,800 survivors yearly that are at the highest risk for homicide. We do this by creating formal continuums of care and ensuring timely information and resources are available in real time. This undoubtedly saves lives.

Over the past decade OVSJG funding and advocacy has been absolutely central to making DC a model city for crisis response for DV. Prior to DC SAFE's inception in 2006 there was no continuum of care for survivors outside of business hours. First responders had nowhere to turn when they encountered a family in need. Through programs like the Critical intervention team, the Lethality assessment Program, and the Crisis Shelter, DC has demonstrated that it is possible to see a return on an investment in innovative and data-driven programming. Unfortunately, while the overall budget for Victims Services has tripled the federal dollars coming in have not kept pace and is limited to only formula grants that are provided to all states.

Innovation and collaboration are key and we hope to further programming where multidisciplinary teams are reacting in coordinated ways to victims' needs in real time. We hope to investigate how systems such as the court and the USAO can use data from risk assessment to make more informed decisions that can further support victim safety. We want to explore how the criminal justice system can better intervene with people who are assessed as higher risk for severely harming or murdering their partners. And we want to implement pilot projects

such as the DVIP that creates noncritical interventions with families repeatedly calling 911. Thus addressing their underlying need and reducing the expense to the city.

In order to do this, we need sustainable support from funders like OVSGJ and the flexibility and political backing that would be required to change the barriers and harm victims of crime are experiencing. While I appreciate the work the council does to ensure that we do not see significant gaps in funding levels, you can see by the “ask” of the VAN and DCCADV, that even at level funding we are not in a sustainable place.

Even when we attempt to help ourselves it seems futile. Our 4th attempt to apply for federal funds this year was stymied by bureaucratic rules that prohibited nonprofits from applying directly. **The four government agencies we approached to partner on the grant were either not allowed to be the lead applicant, in the case of MPD. Or, they declined the opportunity due to capacity or the perceived “fit” of the project, in the case of DHS, the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, and OVSJG.**

I am extremely concerned that if we don’t work together to creatively grow the resources coming into the District we will face difficult decisions and more violence. The funds that OVSJG gets transferred from the court has dwindled, the VOCA funds have been cut, and it seems that the federal portfolio the agency has is quite small.

We all have a duty and residents deserve better!

Natalia Otero

Co-Founder & Executive Director

Testimony of Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment, Inc. (DC SAFE) (2/3)

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Good afternoon Chairperson Pinto and esteemed members of the committee,

I am Nicole Walter, Supportive Advocacy Team Director at DC SAFE. I stand before you today to reiterate what DC SAFE has addressed throughout this budget season, which is the urgent need for both ideological and fiscal commitment from both OVSJG and the DC Council to support the High-Risk Domestic Violence Initiative, also known as the HRDVI.

Regarding the ideological commitment we are calling for:

To be extremely clear, we are simply asking that the City Administrator signs an updated and expanded order that governs the HRDVI. The order has not been amended in any way since it was first signed in 2009. A renewed and explicit endorsement of the administration is paramount at this point in ensuring that the participating government agencies can move forward on our collective plans to refine and improve processes within the HRDVI.

Secondly, regarding the fiscal piece of our ask:

I want to be clear that we are not bringing this issue forth simply to argue for additional funds **just** for the HRDVI. On the one hand, yes funding for the HRDVI is currently insufficient. We do receive partial funding from OVSJG to support the work annually, and as Natalia described, we at least attempted to apply for additional federal funding this year. On the other hand, additional funding to support the HRDVI is not mutually exclusive from baseline funding for the victim services community as a whole. They are both integral and necessary for an effective public safety ecosystem.



SURVIVORS AND ADVOCATES FOR EMPOWERMENT

Supporting and Empowering Domestic Violence Survivors since 1997
Apoyando a Víctimas de Violencia Doméstica desde 1997

As such, going into FY25, DC SAFE supports the Victim Assistance Network's ask for a \$51M baseline funding level for OVSJG. At a minimum, we feel this is what is necessary to properly support the reality of our "new normal."

Also as you've heard from our colleagues today, we stand with the VAN in demanding clarification about how the FY24 budget and proposed FY25 revenue sources impact the bottom line of funding available for victim services in FY25. Any cut to OVSJG's budget will reduce DC SAFE's efficacy by hindering our ability to sustain our current growth and also continue to hamstring projects like the HRDVI which require additional funding at this time.

Moreover, while it may seem like an overly optimistic goal, we also support the VAN's ask for an additional \$21M to OVSJG to support new and expanded programs in FY25, as well as a 25% increase to other partner agencies like DHS. If not achievable this year, the Council must commit to making it happen in the very near future.

Without both baseline and additional funding asks prioritized, we will continue to be both unsustainable and stagnant on our growth as a community. And further, the fidelity of our work to provide compassionate care for survivors will be compromised not only agency by agency, but on a macro level that will inevitably worsen the impact of violence in the District.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Nicole Walter

Supportive Advocacy Team Director