



Working to end sexual violence in Maryland

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Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 148
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The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) is a non-profit membership organization that includes the State's seventeen rape crisis centers, law enforcement, mental health and health care providers, attorneys, educators, survivors of sexual violence and other concerned individuals. MCASA includes the Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI), a statewide legal services provider for survivors of sexual assault. MCASA represents the unified voice and combined energy of all of its members working to eliminate sexual violence. We urge the Appropriations Committee and the Judiciary Committee to report favorably on Senate Bill 148 with conforming amendments.

Senate Bill 148 – Victim Services Stabilization Act

This bill would stabilize victim services funding by backfilling shortages in federal Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funding with state dollars. This would make available funding for core victim services consistent year to year and help ensure access to services for survivors of sexual assault, but also for victims and survivors of many types of crime. These services provide support in the criminal justice system but also outside the courts, supporting services like counseling, shelter, and civil legal services. Federal contributions to VOCA are expected to rise. As they go up, state contributions will go down.

VOCA and Helping Survivors Sexual Violence

While VOCA helps support survivors of many different types of crime, responses to sexual violence include:

- Rape Crisis & Recovery counseling for sexually abused children and adults
- Hospital accompaniment during sexual assault forensic exams (rape kits)
- Advocacy for students who are sexually assaulted at college or in K- 12 schools
- Helping survivors seek protective orders

- Child advocacy centers providing child-centered responses to victims of child abuse
- Victim-witness coordinators who help crime victims in the criminal justice system
- Long term legal services, such as divorce and child custody
- Emergency shelters and programs
- Safe Harbor programs for services for child victims of sex trafficking

VOCA in particular, has long been a source of stable funding for existing service providers and is not a “special project” fund. As a result, funding instability rips at the fabric of Maryland’s victim services safety net.

Sexual assault survivors and services have been affected by the pandemic, inflation, and workforce changes. Sexual assault survivors face increasing mental health needs, substance abuse issues, amplified trauma, and isolation. Economic instability, homelessness, and job loss continue to be concerns, with the uneven economic recovery and inflation. Practical concerns like internet access, lack of privacy, and COVID exposure complicate access to services. Programs across the state report increased demand and more challenging cases.

For each person who reaches out, the survivor is often asking for help with more issues. Where a client might have needed help with a protective order before, now they also need help with eviction, unemployment benefits or other issues. Where a survivor might have needed support from a counselor and a short series of counseling session, now they are finding themselves triggered by the anxiety of the pandemic layered on top of their experience of trauma and in need of long-term therapy. Survivors who previously felt stable and secure in their recovery and returning and new survivors are being victimized and new needs are created.

Perpetrators were emboldened by the COVID pandemic and continuing effects. They are using the pandemic and economic pressures to gain or renew access to victims, intimidate survivors into silence, and interfere with survivors' attempts to seek safety and justice. All across the state, we are hearing reports that violence is becoming more severe.

Federal VOCA Funding – Allocations

Federal funding under the Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) supports a wide range of services for survivors of sexual assault and abuse. There have been significant challenges at the federal level as the pool of federal dollars available for VOCA swung up and down over several years. Maryland received \$61.1 million in federal fiscal year 2018, this steadily fell with a low point of \$18.9 in FFY2021 and rose to \$26.4 in FFY2022. Fortunately, advocacy at the federal level has helped address this and in July of 2021, Congress passed the [VOCA Fix bill](#) with bi-partisan support and [President Biden signed](#)

[it](#) into law. This will replenish the pool of federal VOCA funding that has long supported victim services. The replenishment will, however, take several years.

State VOCA Administration

Challenges at the federal level were complicated by difficulties at the state level. VOCA is administered by the agency now called the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services (formerly GOCCP). Funds may be expended over 3 years. Unfortunately, there was inadequate accounting and lack of transparency from GOCPYVS and information regarding reserves was lacking.

The General Assembly stepped in with important budget language to ensure that funding continued. MCASA is so very grateful for this support. Despite this, VOCA grants to programs were cut nearly 20% on September 24, 2021, days before the grants were set to begin on October 1st. After repeated requests from legislators and from the field Governor Hogan restored these cuts, but this was after the start of the grant period and after harm had been done to services.

When continuing gaps in funding became apparent last session, an additional \$35 million for victim services was allocated as part of a supplemental budget. The General Assembly helped advocate for the additional funding and fenced off \$20 million to help with this effort. **Without this action, rape crisis centers, child advocacy centers, programs helping sex trafficking survivors, domestic violence shelters, and others supporting crime victims across the state would have faced lay-offs, reduced services, or even closure.**

Challenges for Rape Crisis Centers and Other Victim Service Providers

The continuing ups and downs, last minute and significant changes in allocations, and threats to eliminate funding harm the people and organizations who are helping survivors and ultimately harm survivors. Providers report being unable to fill positions because funding is uncertain and, as a result, there is an impact on services. Planning for new services is hampered by the repeated failure to provide information about available funding, last minute requests for grant applications, and shifting deadlines.

Helping survivors of sexual violence takes a toll on the wonderful and dedicated professionals in the field. The funding challenges from the VOCA instability compound challenges to the very people the State should be supporting. **SB148 helps support survivors and the people helping survivors.**

Workforce Challenges

VOCA instability compounds enormous workforce challenges. Rape crisis and sexual assault programs report 20%-33% of staff positions in transition as people retire, resign, or change jobs. This is having a direct impact on funding needs. Programs have increased salaries in order to retain staff. Non-profit providers are now competing with

fast food restaurants and retail establishments offering higher wages, benefits, and bonuses. Demand for professional staff, particularly counseling staff, is even more intense, with private firms actively seeking out and recruiting rape crisis center staff for their expertise responding to trauma. The constant challenges from VOCA make this worse because programs hesitate to fill positions when funding is so uncertain. SB148 will help address this.

SB148 Provisions

Senate Bill 148 will not guarantee that any particular program will receive funding, but the stability it provides will help ensure that the State of Maryland consistently provides strong support for victim services. The base funding for victim services will return to nearly the 2018 federal funding, with a \$60 million floor. Important bill language requires services throughout the State, so rural and urban survivors have access to services. State funds will be able to be used to meet federal match requirement, which will help eliminate a barrier for many smaller and culturally specific programs, and other rules regarding funding will be consistent across state and federal funding sources to simplify administration. Crucially, the government will be required to consult with experts in the field regarding funding allocations.

Conforming amendments: amendments to the cross-file of this legislation, HB186, are clarifying, address reporting, and provide that funds may not be used for capital projects. These are consistent with the purposes of the bill.

Senate Bill 148 does not solve every problem for every need, but it would create a strong structural improvement for survivors of sexual assault and for the many other victims of crime across the state of Maryland.

**The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault
urges the Appropriations Committee and the
Judiciary Committee to
report favorably on Senate Bill 148 with conforming amendments**

