

**Testimony to the New York State
Division of the Budget
Public Hearing, Hauppauge, New York
November 30, 2007**

**Presented by
Pamela Johnston
Executive Director
Victims Information Bureau of Suffolk (VIBS)**

Thank you for the opportunity to be involved in the 2008-2009 budget process. As executive director of VIBS, a family violence and rape crisis center, I am concerned about providing vital services to improve the safety of survivors and witnesses of intimate partner violence.

Since 1976 VIBS has provided programs to assist survivors and prevent further victimization. Services include counseling, safety planning, advocacy and court accompaniment. Our programs include group and individual counseling to adults and adolescents; creative arts therapy and counseling to child witnesses and sexually abused children; outreach and counseling to victims of elder abuse; preventive education and outreach to schools, universities and community groups; and an accountability-focused intervention program for domestic violence offenders. In partnership with the District Attorney's Office and police departments, VIBS coordinates the SANE program in Suffolk County, providing forensic nurses who examine and care for rape victims in hospital settings. Funding for these programs comes from Suffolk County, New York State, United Way, private foundations, donations and fundraising. Most of the county and state contracts we receive are federal dollars.

In consideration of the fiscal constraints facing New York, I would like to address reasonable ways that the 2008-2009 budget can improve outcomes for victims, alleviate survivors' economic hardships, and improve the justice system that has so much control over the lives of victims and their children.

TANF Surplus: Helping abused women gain economic independence

For the last several years, Non-Residential Domestic Violence programs have received flat (in some counties decreased) funding from the TANF Surplus monies through the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. While the demand for non-residential services has increased, and the complexity of problems facing abused women has deepened, funding has not increased. The TANF Surplus funds have been an important means for programs to serve the neediest of victims of domestic violence and their children, helping them to obtain services and empowering them to achieve economic independence.

Please consider increasing the TANF Surplus Line Item for Non-Residential Services to \$10 million.

Integrated Domestic Violence Courts: Effective innovations in the justice system

The justice system in New York State has made great strides in improving protection for victims of domestic violence and their children. Specialized courts provide speedier justice and coordinate an array of services to break the cycle of domestic violence. The goal of the Integrated Domestic Violence (IDV) Courts is to have one court handling cases of “domestic violence, which encompass many issues, heard by one judge in one location,” ensuring a better informed and quicker resolution for the survivor. These courts have a coordinator, but there is no funding for an advocate not employed by the court to spend significant time assisting victims.

Trained advocates from domestic violence programs help survivors understand and navigate their cases, provide emotional support, and connect them to counseling and other programs that can meet their emotional and practical needs. Since Suffolk County launched its IDV Court, VIBS has tried to meet the needs of our clients in that court as well as in two specialized DV parts in District Court, Family Court, Probation Intake, and County Court. These courts are extraordinarily busy. In spite of being pulled in so many directions, VIBS’ advocates accompanied 11 women to the IDV court in November alone. The consistent presence of independent advocates from domestic violence programs will greatly enhance the effectiveness of these courts and improve the safety of victims utilizing the IDV courts.

In the budget for the Department of Criminal Justice Services, please consider allocating federal Violence Against Women (VAWA) funds to domestic violence programs for the specific purpose of placing an advocate in the IDV Court.

Increased Funding for Rape Crisis Services

Rape and sexual assault are probably the most under-reported of all crimes, and survivors of sex crimes are arguably the most traumatized. There have been recent improvements in criminal investigations of these crimes, such as Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner programs in which specially trained forensic nurses provide compassionate care while collecting vital evidence. As a result of collaborations between hospital SANE centers and the criminal justice system, more rape victims – adults and children – are seeking the services of rape crisis centers.

In the Department of Health budget, please consider a significant increase to funding to New York State’s rape crisis centers.