

Budget cuts heighten risk for victims of domestic abuse, agency leaders say

By DEIDRE WILLIAMS
News Staff Reporter
3/8/2005

Erie County's budget crisis will leave hundreds of abused women and children at heightened risk, according to leaders of human service agencies.

The cuts, they said, have forced the elimination of vital support services and programs.

"These cuts will have a tremendous impact on our ability to continue delivering lifesaving services to the women and children who need them most," said Eugene Meeks, head of Child & Family Services.

Officials of service agencies gathered Monday in the headquarters of the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County to discuss the recent cuts - including \$6.2 million to Child & Family Services - and plead with lawmakers to reinstate funding.

Meeks said that last year, his agency provided educational and support services to about 600 victims of domestic abuse but that because of the budget crisis, two primary domestic-abuse programs - Haven House women's shelter and the Family Violence Intervention Program - absorbed steep cuts. "I still don't know the effects of these cuts," he said.

Douglas B. Fabian, executive director of Crisis Services, said the budget cuts would probably result in six to 10 layoffs in his agency. Because of the cuts, some women will remain in abusive relationships because they have nowhere else to go, he said.

"The common forms of violation are broken eye sockets and lips torn off by partners," Fabian said. "We actually don't know what we're going to do for these women."

Domestic-abuse issues are especially tough on new arrivals and immigrants, said Paula Alcala Rosner, executive director of Hispanics United.

New arrivals to this country often do not speak English and are unfamiliar with agencies that could assist them.

"It's harder when you're in another country; you can't understand what's going on," Alcala Rosner said, adding that the county cuts resulted in the reduction of the agency's domestic-violence division by 30 percent.

Also, Hispanics United - which serves about 250 people - had to close its children's services division. "We'll see what we can do to reinstate children's services, and that includes begging," she said. "We have no backup, no options to service these people."

At the Salvation Army, which is dealing with about \$250,000 in budget cuts, two programs were closed - Employee Services and Youth & Family Counseling for Persons in Need of Supervision.

Donald Matteson, operations director of the Salvation Army, said the agency served 500 people under those programs last year.

"It's not about simply the money numbers," Matteson said. "People's lives are being affected."

e-mail: dswilliams@buffnews.com