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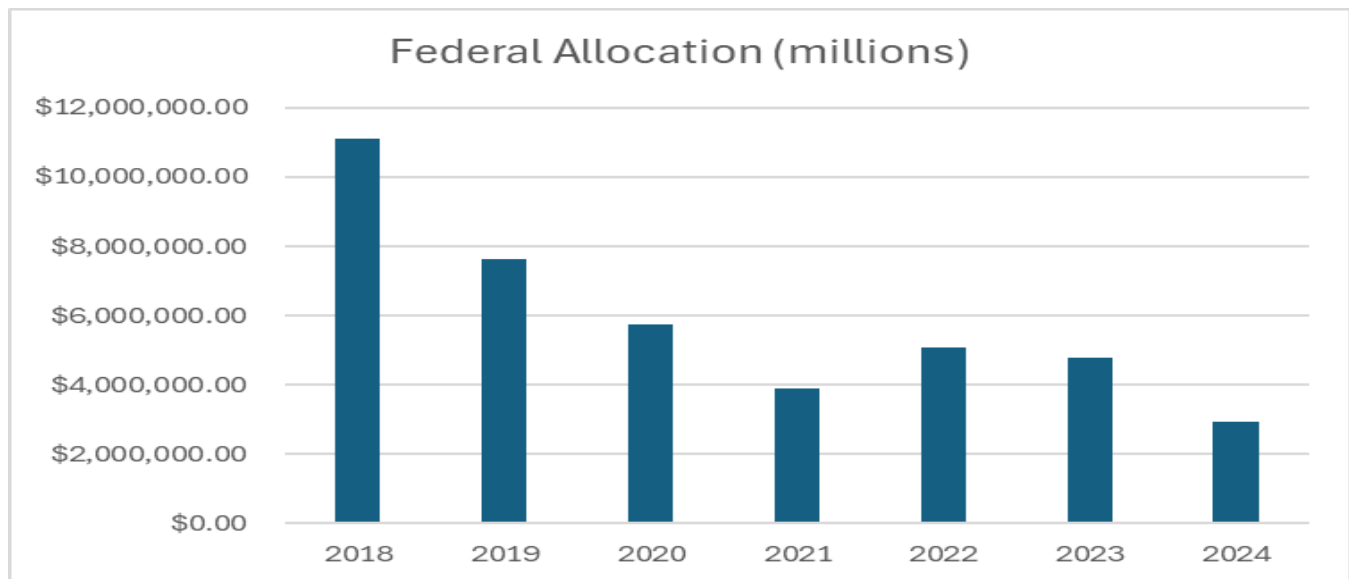
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VOCA Victim Assistance Grant 2024 Executive Summary

The Victims of Crime Act Victim Assistance (VOCA) grant is a federal formula grant program funded by the federal Crime Victim’s Fund. The Fund is financed by fines and penalties paid by convicted federal offenders, not from tax dollars. The funds are distributed to states based upon a multi-year average in the fund. The VOCA rules require a portion of funds to be distributed to certain federal priority areas including victims of domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and underserved populations.

Prior to 2015, Rhode Island regularly received slightly under \$2 million per year and subgrant amounts were relatively stable. Several large criminal settlements led the Fund to balloon in size, peaking in 2018 when Rhode Island received over \$11 million. Every state saw a similar percentage increase in a short period and many states had difficulty fully spending VOCA funds. During this period, existing grantees saw large increases to the size of their awards.



Unfortunately, VOCA has seen precipitous decreases in funding in recent years dropping from over \$11 million in 2018 to \$3.7 million in 2021, a 66% decrease. In 2021, the PSGAO received approximately \$9 million in funding requests and would have required approximately \$6 million to level fund all existing projects. This resulted in most programs receiving an approximate 50% cut. Every state saw a similar fluctuation in funding.

As a response to the budget fluctuations, in 2021 the PSGAO informed all agencies that VOCA would shift to a three-year funding cycle; if an agency were to receive a 2021 award, they would receive awards for 2022 and 2023, subject to fluctuations in funding and risk. This was intended to help provide financial certainty, reduce the application process, and allow the VOCA Advisory Committee to focus their efforts on new applications and agencies not selected for 2021 funding.

Congress passed legislation in 2021, the “VOCA Fix,” causing deferred and non-prosecution agreements to be deposited into the Crime Victim’s Fund (CVF). Previously, these types of penalties went elsewhere. This has had an immediate impact and helped to stabilize the CVF. Rhode Island’s allocation increased to \$5,086,442 in 2022. This stabilization continued in 2023, with only a modest decline to \$4,795,700.

As a result, PSGAO kept its promise of keeping budgets stable between 2021 and 2023. Unfortunately, the “VOCA Fix” has only proven to be a short-term band-aid. All states are seeing a similar 40% reduction in the Federal allocation for 2024, with Rhode Island’s allocation being reduced to \$2,935,210.00. After accounting for administrative expenses and unobligated funds, the maximum amount of funds the PSGAO can currently obligate is \$3,071,449.50. To level fund every existing project, approximately \$4.9 million would be needed.

Lobbying campaigns were conducted by several recipient agencies petitioning the General Assembly for funds to keep VOCA stable. Though valiant, this effort was not successful. When faced with this scenario in 2021, the solution was large flat cuts for every agency. Presently, too many programs would not be viable if faced with a 40% reduction. As a result, programs must be discontinued. The remaining programs, with exceptions discussed below, are slated to receive a 27% reduction.

Further complicating the reductions are two factors. First, the “Law Enforcement Advocate (LEA)” program is being level funded from 2023. This is in conjunction with the four-year VAWA Implementation Plan that reorganized and reinvigorated the LEA program. The Implementation Plan places advocates at the four core members of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. These advocates will be available for every police department in the state. This was a priority of the VAWA Committee and DV/SA service providers. The VAWA Committee has recently authorized \$140,000 to fund two advocate positions from VAWA funds, to help ease the burden on VOCA. The current funding plan will award these funds to the Elizabeth Buffum Chace Center (EBCC) and reduce their VOCA award by that amount. EBCC is well positioned to administratively handle funds from two grants for the same project. However, after accounting for the VAWA funds, this program will cost \$711,418 in VOCA funds. This drops the amount of allocable funds to \$2,360,031 but does not completely cover the required domestic violence set aside in VOCA.

The second factor is ensuring the Rhode Island meets the VOCA statutory priority areas. At least 10% of the award must go to each of the four areas: domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and underserved categories. This requires funding of at least \$293,521 per category. The LEA program itself easily exceeds the 10% for domestic violence, in addition to other programs run by Sojourner House, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and RI Legal Services.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, PSGAO has seen an increased need for services to one of VOCA’s priority areas – abused children. To help address this need and meet the statutory priority amount, programs for Day One’s Children Advocacy Center and Rhode Island Hospital’s Aubin Center are being level funded. The Children Advocacy Center is the only such center in Rhode Island and is critical to conduct forensic interviews of children and provide clinical services. Funding at the Aubin Center supports Child Life Specialists. These two programs, combined with Foster Forward and Adoption RI (at 27% reduction), along with Tides (the successor to St. Mary’s, at a 50% reduction) account for a \$346,959.

The 10% for underserved populations are well covered, with programs for the LGBTQ+, male, immigrant, refugee, and Latino communities. Rhode Island has usually well exceeded the minimum finding level to

underserved populations. This funding plan seeks to preserve these programs, with the 27% reduction, and total approximately \$456,039. This includes Dorcas International (immigrants/refugees), Tri-County Community Action (deaf/hard of hearing), Progreso Latino (Latino/Hispanic), and Thundermist (Transgender).

The final priority area is sexual assault. While many VOCA programs may address sexual assault as part of their overall program, the only programs that neatly and clearly cover this requirement are from Day One. This includes their part in the LEA program. Consideration was given to moving these positions to VAWA, however meeting the 10% sexual assault threshold will be difficult in that scenario. In 2024, Day One combined two programs, their Human Trafficking and Sexual Assault Victim Services grants, into one program focusing on adult victims of sexual assault. In 2023, these programs were funded at a combined \$140,174. To ensure the 10% threshold, this requires a moderate increase to bring the program to \$154,327.

The total for the LEA program and statutory priorities is \$1,808,743.00, leaving only \$1,262,706.50 available for other projects. To fund the remaining projects at their 2023 levels would require a little over \$3 million.

In order to achieve the approximate \$1.8 million reduction on the remaining projects, the proposed funding plan obligates nearly every dollar available, eliminates several programs, and requires most remaining programs to receive a 27% cut.

The plan has zero funds being given to new projects. Several smaller DV grants were eliminated that would become non-viable with a 27% reduction. This includes projects that do not focus on direct services (SOAR, Hate Crimes).

Several programs are being eliminated due to duplicative funding sources (of SASP, SFRF, and State Designated Grants). Community Action Agencies (East Bay, Community Care Alliance, Child and Family) are all being eliminated, as these agencies have a larger variety of funding than many other smaller non-profits.

State agencies are being reduced by 50%, with an eye toward elimination in 2025. The VOCA Committee recommends a year of reduced funding rather than elimination this year.