

Opinion: We cannot turn our backs on survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse

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OPINION COLUMNIST

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Imagine hearing a knock at your front door. When you open it, you find a woman standing with her children, shaking and crying, pleading for your help. She is fleeing, escaping a husband who is threatening to kill her and their children. They have nowhere else to go. What would you do? Would you close the door? Would you turn away?

In Buncombe County, and across our nation, nonprofit organizations provide that open door, offering refuge and support to victims of domestic violence. Recently, they received the unexpected and devastating news that massive funding cuts were coming to programs funded by the federal Victims of Crime Act.

Locally, that means **a loss of more than two million dollars over the next two years to our nonprofits, cuts that will disrupt or end services for victims of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, and human trafficking in**

Buncombe County and beyond. Those funding losses begin October 1, 2021, and threaten essential victim services.

For decades, Pisgah Legal Services, Helpmate, The Mediation Center and Our VOICE have provided a continuum of services in our community, providing hope to victims who are desperate to escape violence and abuse. With these cuts, our nonprofits are facing the very real prospect of having to turn away those who need them most.

The good news is that recently a bipartisan solution was reached and signed into law by Congress and President Biden, but, unfortunately, it will take several years before the funds can accumulate and be made available again to the organizations that depend on them. In the meantime, thousands of local victims will lose access to essential services like:

- Caring attorneys and court advocates who help victims obtain court protective orders and navigate through complex and confusing court proceedings;
- Trauma-informed counselors who understand the fear and terror victims have experienced and help them heal; and
- A place where secure child visitation and exchanges can take place while parents in conflict work towards a better and more stable future for their children.

Local survivors and their children cannot wait years, suffering and dying until federal funding for these services is restored. They need our help now.

Just eight years ago, Buncombe County suffered the second-highest number of domestic violence homicides in the state. Back then, county officials said enough is enough! They created the Family Justice Center, a safe place where victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse can come for help and where nonprofits work together to provide comprehensive support. We can be proud of that investment.

With this new crisis, we need the county's help again. As they debate how to allocate the millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 recovery funding

provided by the American Relief Plan Act (ARPA) they have the opportunity to bridge the gap created by these devastating cuts.

These services are critical to our community, especially as the pandemic continues. According to the United Nations, all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19, a phenomenon called the “Shadow Pandemic.”

Domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and child abuse prevention programs are critical in interrupting multigenerational trauma and ensuring that the cycle of violence is broken for future generations.

According to the Urban Child Institute, children witnessing domestic violence carry a lifelong burden that manifests in developmental delays and serious health issues as well as an increased likelihood of living in violent relationships themselves. If we sacrifice these services now, we will pay for it for generations to come.

We cannot and should not close the door to survivors of abuse and violence and their children. I implore you to contact the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners and urge each public official to provide replacement funding by allocating a portion of the ARPA funds, or other funds, to maintain these much-needed programs.

Please contact your Commissioners today:

- Chairman Brownie Newman (828) 243-0107
or email: brownie.newman@buncombecounty.org;
- Al Whitesides, District 1 (828) 250-4006 or email:
Alfred.Whitesides@buncombecounty.org;
- Terri Wells, District 1 (828) 250-4008 or email:
terri.wells@buncombecounty.org;
- Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, District 1 (828) 250-4004 or email: jasmine.beach-ferrara@buncombecounty.org;

- Amanda Edwards, District 2 (828) 250-4005 or email: amanda.edwards@buncombecounty.org;
- Parker Sloan, District 3 (828) 250-4007 or email: parker.sloan@buncombecounty.org;
- Robert Pressley, District 3 (828) 215-2077 or email: robert.pressley@buncombecounty.org.