



# **VAWA/VOCA: FEDERAL FUNDING IN JEOPARDY**

AN ADVOCATE'S GUIDE TO TAKING ACTION

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THE COALITION TO END RELATIONSHIP ABUSE



**VIOLENCE FREE**  
MINNESOTA



# VAWA/VOCA: Federal Funding in Jeopardy

## The Issue

Money from the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) comprises more than 50% of the funds that the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) distributes to Minnesota's domestic and sexual violence programs. With a major decrease of VOCA dollars, OJP will not be able to maintain current levels of funding for programs. OJP is currently managing VOCA dollars to make sure there is no reduction in grants to programs right away, but if the current federal situation continues, victim programs will see a major reduction in their grants in about 2 years.

The VOCA funds come from criminal fines and fees. More than 50% of the funding for local domestic and sexual violence programs come from VOCA. If there are no changes to VOCA distribution, current projections show a potential significant reduction in funds flowing into the VOCA account. On top of this reduction, VOCA dollars are now being used to fund the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Since its passage - and until a few years ago - VAWA was funded through the "general fund," the primary fund used by the federal government. Now, VAWA is funded by the VOCA fund. By using VOCA dollars for VAWA - rather than money from the general fund - **VAWA has essentially been defunded**. It is no longer funded as a core administrative and operational task of the federal government. **This will ultimately result in an additional decrease in VOCA dollars.**

We depend on VOCA dollars to provide critical services to survivors and their families. This decision will have a devastating impact on victims and their children in communities across Minnesota. Please, take action today.

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## What Can Programs Do?

Direct constituent interactions have more influence on lawmakers' decisions than any other advocacy strategy.

Influencing public decision-making is a critical and legal means for nonprofit organizations to accomplish their missions. Open communication between policymakers and their constituents - including domestic and sexual violence programs - contributes to well-informed policies and their effective implementation. This communication is necessary to ensure that programs have access to VOCA dollars in the future.

To the fullest extent possible, programs should: educate their legislators and community; provide opportunities to deliberate on public policies; engage community members in advocacy activities; and promote the interests of survivors and their families.

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## Contact Your Legislators

**Programs should reach out to your federal representatives NOW.** Send emails. Send letters. Make calls. Schedule tours of your program and arrange in-person meetings with your legislators.

### Writing Letters and Emails

Introduce your program and your services to your legislator. Telling a personal story or experience is very powerful and influential. Personal stories remind legislators that their policies impact real people who are simply trying to do their best for themselves and their children. Sharing personal stories and survivor experiences is an effective and informative way to make a connection with your elected official. To have the **most** impact, the personal story or experience **has** to be related to the current issue. Make sure when writing a letter that you talk about the specific impact a 50% cut in VOCA dollars would have on survivors and their families.

Consider: what success have you had in supporting a survivor because there was a steady stream of VOCA funding? What would your program – or a survivor – do if those funds weren't there?

Please use the sample email script in the “What do I say?” section of this packet.

### Telephone Calls

A personal phone call can have a large impact on the way your legislator votes on your issue if done at the right time - especially if it is part of a large, coordinated effort. We need all programs across the state to make calls to their legislators to schedule a meeting and discuss the impact of VOCA funding. Please use the sample phone script in the “What do I say?” section of this packet.



### Personal Office Visits

This is a great way to start an intentional relationship with your legislator. These relationships are essential to your role as a domestic violence advocate. Personal office visits allow you to take your issue directly to your legislator and communicate face-to-face. Face-to-face communication is the most effective way of demonstrating the real impact policy has on victims and survivors of domestic violence. When you tell a personal story in a legislators' office, it creates an emotional connection to the issues their constituents are facing. These visits enable legislators to understand where you are coming from and why. You can meet with the legislator or with the legislator's staff. Violence Free Minnesota is happy to accompany you and program staff at any and all meetings with legislators! Please contact Katie at [kkramer@vfmn.org](mailto:kkramer@vfmn.org).

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## What do I say?

Legislators need to know from you: What is the REAL IMPACT that funding cuts will have on the services that you provide for survivors and their families?

Think beyond cuts to staff (example: if you had to cut staff, what services would you then be unable to provide?). If you experienced a 50% reduction in your state grant, what impact would that have on your community, the survivors you serve and the services you provide?

## SAMPLE PHONE SCRIPT

“My name is [your name], I am [your title, name of your program] from [city]. I am writing as a constituent and as a member of Violence Free Minnesota – the Coalition to End Relationship Abuse. I am calling [the Representative] to express my profound concern about the potential decrease in VOCA funding on the federal level. Our program depends on VOCA dollars to provide critical services to domestic violence survivors and their children. Cuts in VOCA funding [briefly describe the way in which a 50% cut in VOCA dollars would impact your services. What stops happening in your community without these funds?] I would like to request a meeting in the district with [the Representative] to discuss this matter and share more about the services we provide.”

**Note:** at this point you will likely be transferred to the Representative’s scheduler, or to the staffer that covers DV/SV issues in the office. Follow their instructions to make a formal request for a meeting.

Violence Free Minnesota staff is happy to accompany you at meetings with legislators and/or provide you materials and information for your meeting.

Please contact Katie at [kkramer@vfmn.org](mailto:kkramer@vfmn.org).

## SAMPLE EMAIL SCRIPT

Dear Representative,

My name is [your name], I am [your title, name of your program] from [city]. I am writing as a constituent and as a member of Violence Free Minnesota – the Coalition to End Relationship Abuse. I care deeply about the safety and well-being of my community.

I am writing to express my profound concern that VAWA is no longer being funded out of the general fund but instead through VOCA, which will result in a dramatic decrease in VOCA funding on the federal level. Our program depends on VOCA dollars to provide critical services to domestic violence survivors and their families. This decision will have a devastating impact on victims and their children in our community. VOCA dollars represent 50% to 60% of our funding. With the potential for significant reduction in VOCA funding, we are deeply concerned and ask that you take action to ensure that VOCA dollars are secure to support domestic and sexual violence programs.

**[In a paragraph (or more!) describe the way in which a significant cut in VOCA dollars would impact your services. What happens to survivors in your community without your services? What happens to the children of survivors without your services?]**

VAWA must be funded out of the general fund as it has been for decades, so that the VOCA dollars that allow our program to provide critical services to survivors and their children remain intact. In [city] we value – and deserve – safe communities. We hope you will be a voice for victims. I urge [the Representative] to do whatever is in their power to ensure that VAWA is funded through the general fund to sustain VOCA funding and give domestic violence programs the resources they desperately need.

Please contact me with any questions or to schedule a tour or in-district meeting with [your program].

Sincerely,  
[Your Name]  
[Your Address]  
[Your Phone Number]

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## Who Represents Me or My Program?

Minnesota is divided into 8 congressional districts, each represented by a member of the United States House of Representatives. You can find out your congressional district and who represents you [here](#).

Please note that some programs who cover multiple counties may, then, have multiple Representatives. We encourage you to meet and speak with the representatives in all of your services areas!

**Minnesota has 2 U.S. Senators that represent the entire state. They are:**

**Senator Tina Smith**  
60 Plato Blvd East, Suite 220  
Saint Paul, MN 55107  
651-221-1016

Senator Smith also has office locations in Rochester, Moorhead, Duluth, and Washington, DC.

Contact details can be found [here](#).

Email contact form available [here](#).

**Senator Amy Klobuchar**  
1200 Washington Avenue South,  
Room 250  
Minneapolis, MN 55415  
612-727-5220

Senator Klobuchar also has offices in Rochester, Moorhead, Virginia, MN, and Washington, DC.

Contact details can be found [here](#).





# VAWA/VOCA: Federal Funding in Jeopardy

## Lobbying vs. Advocacy

Generally speaking, the IRS defines lobbying as the attempt to influence the passage, defeat, introduction or amendment of legislation, including bills introduced by a federal, state or local legislative body, bond issues, referenda, constitutional amendments, and Senate confirmation votes on Executive branch nominees. In sum, lobbying is any attempt to influence any specific legislation, and can be direct (expressing directly to your legislator that they should support a specific bill), or grassroots (asking the general public to contact their legislators to support a specific bill). Non-profit organizations can do nominal lobbying but just cannot use any government dollars to fund that work.

Just having a conversation with a legislator is not automatically lobbying. Talking with legislators, educating them about who you are, what you do, how funding cuts impact your services is **NOT** lobbying. Advocacy includes educating policymakers and the public about broad social issues, encouraging people to register to vote, organizing communities, educating voters about candidate positions, litigating, and many other activities; these are not lobbying.

With the exception of legislation specific lobbying and supporting a specific candidate or political party, all of the forms of advocacy listed above are unrestricted and unlimited for 501(c)(3) public charities. Provided are some examples of activities 501(c)(3) organizations CAN and CANNOT do.

If you are uncertain whether your program can do a certain activity, you can always check with Katie Kramer at Violence Free Minnesota, [kkramer@vfmn.org](mailto:kkramer@vfmn.org).

### Things you CAN do as a 501(c)(3):

- Conduct voter registrations and nonpartisan get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts. These efforts must be designed to educate the public about the importance of voting.
- You can target low-income populations or communities—this may include communities of color or student populated areas. Your effort can not be biased, meaning you cannot support or oppose any one candidate or party.
- Educate the public on issues and encourage participation in the political process.
- Educate all candidates and political parties on your specific issues.
- Conduct or participate in a nonpartisan candidate forum. It must be open to all candidates for a particular office, it must be run in a “balanced” way, and include a broad range of nonpartisan candidates.
- Make presentations on your organizations’ issues to create a community platform, campaign candidates, media, and the general public.
- Work on behalf of a ballot measure.
- Rent or sell mailing lists to candidates at fair market value if made available to all parties.

### Things you CANNOT do as a 501(c)(3):

- Endorse or oppose a candidate for public office implicitly or explicitly.
- Contribute money or time for a particular candidate.
- Coordinate activities with a candidate.
- Restrict rental of your mailing lists and facilities to certain candidates.
- Set up, fund, or manage a Political Action Committee (PAC), established under section 527 of the tax code mainly for electoral activity.