

*Remarks by Elizabeth Barnhill, Executive Director,
Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault
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I am Elizabeth Barnhill, executive director of the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault, speaking on behalf our organization and also the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

We are here at a time of crisis for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Programs that have saved lives, provided hope and healing, and helped victims become survivors, survivors restored to their communities – many of these programs may close.

Local sexual assault and domestic violence programs rely on a combination of state, federal, and private funds. Since 1979, Iowa has provided support for these programs, however, a number of changes and tight budget years have dramatically eroded funding. In 2002, the state budget line item to support these programs was eliminated and nine programs were forced to close or merge. Money was taken from the Iowa Attorney General's Victim Compensation Fund as a temporary "fix" to allow the remaining programs to keep their doors open. This fund has now been severely depleted and can no longer provide funds for these crucial victim assistance programs.

Domestic violence and sexual assault programs are essential community services, services relied on by law enforcement, prosecution, health care providers and schools, as well as victims themselves. Research shows that two strategies victims say are most likely to make an abuse situation better are contacting a domestic violence victim program and actually staying at a domestic violence shelter. Research also demonstrates that increasing

survivors' knowledge of safety planning and of community resources leads to increased safety and well-being.

Women who have stayed in shelters are more likely to have escape plans, use active resistance strategies against abusers and seek help from professionals.

Similarly, research has shown that assistance by rape crisis centers reduces ongoing trauma to victims, and also improves the effectiveness of prosecutors and law enforcement. Sexual assault is most often a crime experienced by young people, and services to youth are crucial. Recently, a mishandled sexual assault report at the University of Iowa led to an investigation by the Iowa Board of Regents. The investigation found that neglecting to provide a victim advocate for the victim was a key failing. It is ironic that as one Iowa institution cites the importance of advocates, our state is on the verge of eliminating that resource for many Iowa victims.

Already, resources are stretched to their limits. Three programs serve eight counties, with one program serving nine. Four programs are responsible for meeting the needs of Iowans in 33 counties. These service areas are not practical in helping victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Victims need in-person medical and legal advocacy and staff who are able to travel to assist women at the time of an arrest.

Women are at greater risk and less likely to seek help when they are forced to leave their communities, jobs, and take their kids out of school in order to seek shelter which may be several counties away from their community. Rural victims are even less likely to travel to an urban area with their children to seek services and unfortunately, this funding crisis will disproportionately affect rural victims and their children.

We understand that the state budget is an issue; however, this is a crisis that has been looming for years. Over the last few years, the Attorney General, the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault have notified the Governor's Office and members of the Iowa General Assembly that these reserve funds were nearing depletion. Unless a stable funding source is secured for the Victim Assistance Grant line item, FY2009 will be the last year that Iowa's domestic violence and sexual assault programs will receive \$4 million in funding. Without this, approximately nine of Iowa's current programs, who serve an average four counties each, will close. These closures will result in existing programs, once again, being forced to increase their service areas and communities will lose these essential and life-saving services.

We realize that these are tough economic times, but we also know from experience that these tough times will lead even more Iowans to seek out our services. We cannot allow those seeking assistance to find the door to safety closed. We are calling on the General Assembly and the Governor to honor our state's commitment to the lives of Iowans who experience domestic and sexual assault, and -- assure the availability of these essential services by enacting a line item appropriation of four million dollars.