

MISSOURI PROSECUTORS OBTAIN VOCA FUNDING FOR A PROSECUTION VICTIM ADVOCATE IN EVERY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT.

By Jason Lamb, Executive Director, Missouri Office of Prosecution Services



"Crime victims suffer physical, emotional and financial losses. Unfortunately, in the majority of jurisdictions in Missouri, those can be exacerbated by courts, law enforcement officers, prosecuting attorneys and criminal justice personnel who may not be aware of the rights afforded to victims or the means to connect crime victims to the resources they so desperately need.

In 1992 the voters of Missouri amended the Missouri Constitution and adopted the Crime Victims' Bill of Rights. This guaranteed crime victims the rights to basic courtesies and information including being present at proceedings, being heard at sentencing, being notified about court dates, as well as restitution and protection from the defendant. While much progress has been made in the field of victim services throughout the state of Missouri since then, prosecutors in the state of Missouri still struggle to meet their statutory mandate to provide prosecutor-based victim services programs. The right to be informed, the right to be present at all court appearances, the rights to be heard and the right to confer with the prosecuting attorney, have been implemented in varying ways in 52 out of 115 prosecutorial jurisdictions in Missouri."

These words opened the narrative for an historic grant application by the Missouri Association of Prosecuting Attorneys (MAPA) last fall. MAPA was awarded a grant totaling approximately \$4 million to fund 41 prosecutor based victim advocates throughout the state.

In the late spring of 2015, it was announced that a substantial increase in available grant funding was going to be released through the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant. Despite being the only actors charged by law with protecting and enforcing crime victims' rights, only about 40% of Missouri prosecutors' offices have been able to provide victim services, either through some type of local funding or grant funding. Recognizing a unique opportunity to bring comprehensive, dedicated funding to the vast majority of Missouri's prosecutor offices, we developed a strategy to pursue this grant.

A MAPA VOCA Task Force was formed to tackle the issue. The task force was composed of a cross-section of the membership, including offices that were urban and rural, full-time and part-time, and offices that currently received VOCA funds, as well as those with no victim advocates. The task force gathered facts, including vital information from the Georgia Prosecuting Attorneys' Council, which had previously put together a similar initiative, and recommended to the MAPA board that we apply for a statewide grant, using MAPA as a conduit organization.

With unanimous support from the MAPA board, task force members and staff set about recruiting elected prosecutors to sign onto the grant application. Between task force members and staff, we made phone calls, and put together a FAQ sheet to distribute. We also discussed it with the Electeds at the Annual Membership Meeting. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

The main components of the grant include: (1) uniformity of baseline pay for victim advocates as a profession; (2) uniformity of training for all prosecutor based victim advocates; and (3) uniformity of data input and collection statewide on victim services.

The grant is structured along circuit lines, with the goal of ensuring that each participating circuit receives funding for at least one prosecutor-based victim advocate. Using the long-standing multi-county child support project as a template, one office in each participating circuit is denoted as a host office.



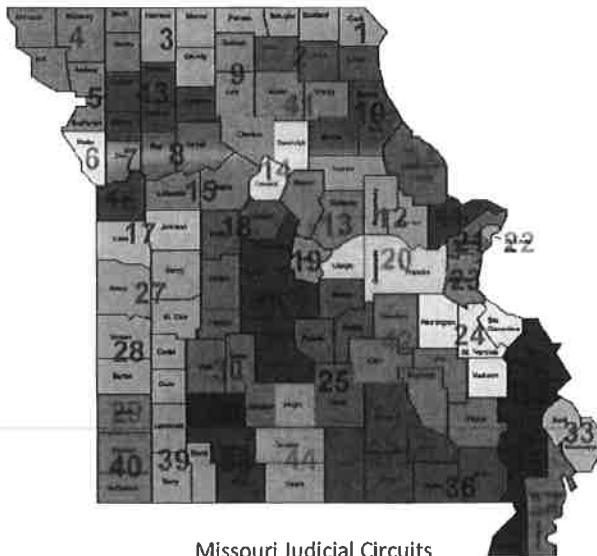
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While all elected prosecutors in the circuit will be jointly responsible for determining how they would select, supervise and share the victim advocate, the host office will be responsible for having the advocate on the payroll, submitting paperwork for reimbursement and housing the advocate. A formula was developed to create a case threshold amount in order to determine the number of victim advocates needed.

As a conduit organization, MAPA will receive all monthly paperwork from the advocates (timesheets, pay stubs, etc), and then handle the administrative reimbursement claim to the Department of Public Safety. Once the claim is approved, then MAPA will issue monthly reimbursement checks to the host offices.

Participating offices agree to send the victim advocate to uniform training and to utilize a uniform method of data collection and report gathering through our statewide case management system. This will allow us to develop a complete and accurate picture of victim services statewide, which currently does not exist.

Some of our larger offices renewed their previously existing VOCA grants independently, or did not need any grant funding. However, they agreed to support the MAPA grant by participating in uniform training and data collection through the victim service module of our statewide case management system.



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Because we applied as a statewide association, we were able to pool together all participating offices into a single match pool. The local general revenue that larger counties were already expending on victim services was able to cover match that smaller counties could not afford. Fortunately, no county had to outlay any new match in order to participate.

We gathered memorandums of support from various community based victim services groups, such as the child abuse advocacy group, and MADD. The Missouri Victims Assistance Network agreed to assist with our volunteer component, and draft a volunteer handbook. We are going to work with them to recruit college students as volunteers who will be able to assist via telephone.

This is a very exciting time for victim services in Missouri. For the first time since the passage of the crime victims' rights amendment, we are able to substantially enforce and protect those rights on behalf of crime victims.