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NEWS

Victims' services in Mass. face 'crippling' cuts as lawmakers weigh $13M lifeline

Updated May 18, 2026, 11:02 a.m. | Published May 18, 2026, 5:50 a.m.

Pictured is a patient's sexual assault evidence kit in Massachusetts.

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By Hadley Bernstein | HBernstein@bostonglobe.com

This week will serve as a pivotal moment for crime victims in Massachusetts, as state House and Senate budget leaders will embark on Beacon Hill decide whether to sanction an amendment that would provide "lifesaving" funding for next year's budget.

"This is not an unreliable choice," said Liam Lowney, executive director of the Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance. "The alternative isn't acceptable."

Neither the House nor Senate state budgets for fiscal year 2027 included funding for the Victim Services Fund Fund, a pot of money historically tied to make-up for a decrease in federal dollars going to victims' services over the years.

Up for negotiation in the Senate this week is a $13.8 million amendment, sponsored by Sen. Paul Feeley, D-Milford, that would provide a lifeline to the state's fiscal support for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child trafficking and more.

The Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance (MOVA) disbursed both federal and state funding to more than 100 organizations across the state in fiscal year 2025, more than 70,000 victims of crime were provided with over 400,000 free services from MOVA-funded programs.

Of that, state dollars funded 20,753 services to survivors.

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Organizations and programs are preparing to run, on average, a 70% reduction in funding beginning July 1 because of federal funding shortfalls and the absence of state money.

"Frankly, we're already hearing from programs. We have to come up with a plan to start laying off staff," Lowney said, noting victims' services in Massachusetts will lack "desirable different" next year without the money.

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Sexual assault resources and information in Whose or The Women's Center, a rape crisis center in New Bedford.

"We cannot tell survivors to 'speak out' if we are simultaneously cutting staffing at clinics, crisis centers, and shelters they need when they do," Liz Speakman, the center's executive director, said at a community last month.

The Massachusetts Children's Alliance, a coalition of all 12 child advocacy centers across the state, is stating about the potential "devastation" of a gold-star program specifically focused on the trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Thomas King, executive director of the alliance, said the program, which has been "transformative" for children across the state, is "at risk" if MOVA cannot find state plans to address six trafficking, as an important one to sustain. And yet the dollars to fund it are on the line.

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"If we lost this funding, we would be, I think, just crippled," King said. "I mean, the entire system is crippled, but we are in the business of keeping up with the demand for services and the demand for prevention."

The history behind victims' services funding

A major federal funding source — the Victims of Crime Act — has been declining for years due to a lack of diverse sources through the fund.

Lowney described that fines and fees from mostly white-collar prosecutions at the federal level have historically funded the act. Thus, as Congress began giving out more dollars to states, the Department of Justice began requiring states to provide a match of grab, meaning the associated money was diverted to a different fund.

Those colliding forces have ultimately led to diminishing federal dollars for victims' services. In fiscal years 2021, 2024 and 2025, the Massachusetts Legislature invested approximately $20 million a year, "which allowed us to push all this cliff we've been facing," Lowney said.

"Now going into FY27, we don't have any state money available to support programs," he added.

Impact of Mass. Office of Victim Assistance funding FY2025

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The services in question include everything from rape hotlines, to forensic interviewers for children, to homicide bereavement programs, to sexual assault support advocates at hospitals.

Last year, MOVA distributed $40 million to such programs. This year, there are $47 million in requests and just $25 million to go around.

In the House, Democratic leaders have said the coming budget will be a "very very difficult fiscal year in a truly, truly challenging economic environment."

As lawmakers work to submit a budget, they're contending with modest revenue growth, a looming fiscal cliff, tariff uncertainty and several affordability crisis affecting household budgets.

Starting Monday, Beacon Hill will wade through the 1,198 amendments that have been filed to the $62.5 billion spending plan for fiscal 2026-27 that Democratic budget writers rolled out earlier this month.

"It's a tough fiscal year," Lowney said. "The state, to look at it from the best perspective, they don't see this historically. They see these as allotments every just these fiscal years. It's a problem they would like to see having been addressed by now. But I think it's important so recognize that these are lifesaving programs and that are going to be hard-hit and not available to serve people."

MOVA's Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs Maeve Kidney said staff at Cass Mental Health's lifesaving domestic violence program, recently said the organization stands to lose about $600,000, which will likely force them to lay off half a dozen employees.

"What that means for public safety across the board is very concerning," Kidney said.

Impact to child advocacy centers

In Massachusetts' 12 children's advocacy centers, multidisciplinary teams convene in response to allegations of child sexual assault. There, children meet with one forensic interviewer while others can observe and submit questions. The idea is by telling their story once, a child doesn't have to be re-traumatized by multiple conversations.

In fiscal year 2025, the centers served 4,370 children (15% younger than 12) and provided more than 2,000 forensic interviews and prevention initiatives focused on child trafficking. 1,237 children were served.

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"These centers afford the space for a child and their family to be greeted by [various] systems in hospitality, the most child-friendly, trauma-informed manner," said King, of the Massachusetts Children's Alliance.

Overall, the 12 child advocacy centers are facing down more than $1 million in cuts for fiscal year 2027.

Since 2019, grant dollars from MOVA have funded a specialized trafficking and exploitation case manager in each of the centers. King described it as a line of work that "reaches into a very insidious form of abuse."

Without the Senate amendment to restore funding, King said the projected cuts would "likely decimate that workforce" as of July 1.

"We have states that are trying to copy what we're doing," he said. "It would be unacceptable for that to be decimated by a change in the fiscal year of this magnitude."

Meanwhile, King described child exploitation, particularly online, as "rampant." A recent article by the Boston Globe reported Massachusetts State Police received more than 20,000 CyberTipline reports about child exploitation in 2025, a 75% increase in a single year.

If lawmakers' negotiations go his way, "we would remain whole," King said of the child advocacy centers. "We would be over the moon if this amendment carried."

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Hadley Bernstein
Hadley Bernstein is Mass.live's statewide enterprise reporter, producing investigations and feature stories. Previously, she was a 2024-25 Ted Rueda Engaged Newspaper and Press Association in 2024 and a...more
hbernstein@bostonglobe.com

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