

Saturday essay: Ohio must raise spending for domestic violence services

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BY DEIDRA LASHLEY

For survivors of domestic violence and their children, finding affordable housing — a place of safety and stability — is key to moving out of danger. In Toledo, Bethany House provides a long-term transitional shelter with 16 units, where survivors can stay for up to two years. The problem: There's not enough space, not enough dollars to do the work needed to rebuild lives. There's always a waiting list to get into Bethany House — often for months.

Across Ohio, resources are inadequate. The Ohio Domestic Violence Network reports that, in 2022, shelters across the state had to turn away about 35 percent of survivors seeking emergency shelter — about one in three — because of insufficient funding.

We can and must do better. That's why it's vital that citizens of Ohio and our state legislators support a recommendation from Gov. Mike DeWine and Attorney General Dave Yost to add \$20 million in funding for domestic violence services in the Ohio budget for 2024-2025. This intensified state funding is crucial — particularly because federal funding for domestic violence services has been cut by 60 percent across Ohio since 2019.

At Bethany House, we work with survivors to access the community services and support they need. We also offer an affordable housing program with 10 units, through which we are able to rent apartments at below-market rates to those leaving the transitional shelter and to continue to offer them supportive services. That's key because some survivors may face extreme barriers to finding housing, particularly if they have faced evictions because of domestic violence incidents, or their credit had been destroyed.

At least 75 percent of the survivors we serve have children. We provide trauma assessments for the children and create service plans for wrap-around care. Children who are exposed to violence in their own families, and sometimes experience it themselves, carry the pain of that in their bodies and their psyches for years.

These are life-and-death matters.

In the fiscal year ending in June, 2022, Ohio saw the greatest number of children killed in domestic violence ever in a year — 22 children lost their lives.

Six of those fatalities were just babies, including a day-old infant. Ohio reported 81 victims killed in domestic violence cases that fiscal year, along with 31 perpetrators. The oldest was a 90-year-old woman.

Both federal budget cuts and the coronavirus pandemic hurt our agency. We had to cancel fund-raisers and try to piece funding together. But Bethany House and other domestic violence agencies need more consistent funding, to help pay our staffs and cover infrastructure expenses such as utility and insurance costs and building maintenance.

Why should taxpayers pay more to support domestic violence programs? Safe communities start with safe homes. Domestic violence causes trauma that echoes through our city — leading to increased expenses for police and emergency responders, medical care, property damage, and lost wages.

It's time for Ohio to support the plan our governor and attorney general have presented for doing better and providing consistent resources for domestic violence services. Our current spending falls well short of the commitment made by surrounding states.

Ohio now spends 32 cents per capita on domestic violence services, compared with 92 cents for Indiana, \$1.41 for West Virginia, \$1.56 for Pennsylvania, and \$2.54 for Kentucky. The additional proposed funding would bring Ohio's per capita rate up to 85 cents per capita.

That commitment can save lives, save taxpayers' money, and save our children immense pain.

It's the right thing to do.

Deidra Lashley is executive director of Bethany House, which provides safe shelter and advocacy for survivors of domestic violence in the Toledo area.

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