

Keep aid to fight domestic violence

By **MICHELE MCKEON AND MADELINE GARCIA BIGELOW**

First published: Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Gov. David Paterson should have known better. As he is being investigated for potentially misusing his power, and the power of the New York State Police, to influence a victim of domestic violence to drop her order of protection petition, the public is learning what all victim advocates know. Victims will not seek protection from domestic violence if they fear retaliation.

We've seen it before. Former state Sen. Hiram Monserrate's girlfriend initially cooperated with law enforcement, but changed her mind despite video evidence that Monserrate dragged her from her apartment to seek medical treatment for wounds he was accused of, but never convicted of, inflicting. This behavior, played out so publicly on the front pages of newspapers, is the kind of intimidation and fear that domestic violence victims experience, alone and behind closed doors, throughout New York.

Domestic violence is a widespread and dangerous problem in New York. The State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence reported a 25 percent increase in domestic violence homicides from 2007 to 2008. And it's getting worse. In these grim economic times, more victims of domestic violence are seeking help.

Domestic violence protections require victims to navigate complicated and frightening systems, including the courts. Many victims cannot seek these protections on their own. As the past weeks have shown, domestic violence victims in New York face very real obstacles in trying to obtain protection and safety, and they often fail without an expert advocate.

For the past 10 years, the state has responded to this need by providing \$3 million in dedicated federal funding. This funding supports programs throughout New York that provide trained advocates and lawyers to provide the critical supportive counseling and legal advocacy that many victims need to seek protection against domestic violence.

These programs provide life-saving services. For example, in New York City, providers serve more than 4,200 victims each month. Yet the governor has proposed to eliminate this funding in next year's budget.

This is not cost effective. Cutting these modest funds ultimately would result in higher state costs in other areas, including increased emergency room visits, public assistance, and shelter costs.

The average cost of a two-month stay in a domestic violence shelter in New York state is \$16,296 for a three-person family. Preventing shelter placement of just 184 families will save the state the \$3 million annual cost of these programs. And our programs prevent thousands of victims from having to go into shelter each year.

A victim's decision to report the abuse is a courageous first step. New York cannot abandon victims of domestic violence. If this funding is not restored, tens of thousands of victims of domestic violence each year will not receive critical services.

We urge the Legislature to restore this critical funding to the budget to protect victims of domestic violence throughout New York.

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