"Unprecedented Times": The Impact of Funding Structure on Grant Projects through the Violence Against Women Act

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence, including rape, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual contact and non-contact experiences, as well as stalking, are extremely common in the U.S. Roughly 1 in 3 women has experienced sexual violence in some form over her lifetime and approximately 1 in 6 has experienced stalking. In addition to the physical outcomes of sexual violence, which may include genital trauma, other bodily injuries, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy, sexual violence and stalking are associated with numerous mental health outcomes including anxiety, guilt, self-blame, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression.1,2

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed in 1994 to address sexual violence, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.3,4 It created the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) within the Department of Justice to administer financial and technical assistance through grant programs and other means.5 More than $7 billion in grants has been awarded by OVW in its 24 years to local, state and tribal governments; courts; non-profits; community-based organizations; schools and universities; and state and tribal coalitions.6 OVW currently administers 19 grant programs.7

Congress is required to renew the law every five years, but reauthorization lapsed in 2019.8,9 This lapse, in addition to grant notices of funding opportunities cautioning applicants that funds are not guaranteed, suggests that program funding is not necessarily predictable.9 Furthermore, project periods range from 12 to 36 months, requiring recipients to develop objectives that can be achieved in a fairly short time period.5,10

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to conduct qualitative and quantitative research to examine the impacts of the funding structure of VAWA grants, particularly grant length and the unreliability of funds, on grant awardees’ abilities to plan, implement, and evaluate effective programs. The study examined organizations’ responses to the administrative components of their current VAWA grant and, for recipients of previous awards, whether their responses changed over time. This research helps illuminate the impacts of the administrative aspects of VAWA grants on those in the field working to fulfill the law’s goals.

METHODS

Three VAWA grant programs of differing project length were selected to participate in an online survey: State and Territorial Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Coalitions Program (12 months); Grants to Enhance Culturally Specific Services for Victims of Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, and Stalking Program (24 months); and Grants to Reduce Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence, Dating Violence and Stalking on Campus Program (36 months). All 165 recipients of 2018 grants from the three programs were eligible for participation.

A dual-methods online survey, developed in Survey Monkey, was emailed to organizations and directed to the project’s principal investigator or program director. The survey asked respondents to identify any modifications made to the planned program due to the project period length and potentially unreliable funding for their current grant, and whether they had made changes compared to grants received in previous years. The survey was open for approximately 3 weeks. In addition to the original email, 3 reminder emails were sent to organizations that had not completed the survey nor opted out. All data was deidentified and analyzed in aggregate. SPSS was used to conduct univariate and bivariate analysis on quantitative results and qualitative results were analyzed by theme. This study was deemed exempt by the George Washington University IRB.

RESULTS

Do organizations make modifications to their programs in response to the possibility that federal funding may cease to be available?

State and Territorial Coalitions (12 months) Culturally Specific Services (24 months) Campus Programs (36 months)

No 81% No 45% No 14%

Yes 19% Yes 55% Yes 86%

Most Commonly Used Words in Open-Ended Responses

- "These are unprecedented times. De-funding or shortening critical community projects, which take time to establish and become sustainable, would be devastating, and may significantly damage domestic violence victim access to local nonprofit organizations, such as ours." – Culturally Specific Services (24-month grant)

- "Goals have been pared down to reflect the length of the grant." – Campus Program (36-month grant)

- "Long term meaningful outcomes are difficult to measure with annual grants." – State and Territorial Coalition (12-month grant)

CONCLUSIONS

Recipients of VAWA grants of varying lengths respond to administrative requirements differently, but organizations from each grant type surveyed described challenges due to administrative aspects of the grant. Such challenges included devoting more resources to seeking additional funding, modifying their program timeline based on award cycles, and not having the time to conduct sufficient needs assessments or evaluation. Violence against women is a critical public health issue and one that can only be adequately addressed if organizations can implement their planned programs completely and without restrictive project lengths and potentially unreliable funding.

REFERENCES


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