
BILL NO: House Bill 186
TITLE: Victim Services Programs - Supplementing Federal Funding and Support
(Victim Services Stabilization Act)
COMMITTEE: Appropriations
HEARING DATE: January 31, 2023
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The Women's Law Center of Maryland (WLC) is a statewide, non-profit legal services provider, dedicated to ensuring the physical safety, the economic security, and the bodily autonomy of women across Maryland. Our primarily statewide direct legal services include representing survivors of domestic violence in protective order hearings, family law matters, and immigration proceedings. We also provide free legal information and referrals through our Family Law Hotline and Employment Law Hotline. All told, the WLC serves thousands of Marylanders a year, most of whom would not have had access to an attorney otherwise.

The WLC supports House Bill 186 as it seeks to stabilize funding for victim services and address administrative burdens that have put essential projects, like those run by the WLC, in jeopardy. HB186 specifically addresses challenges victim services providers experience regarding Federal Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funds administered by the State. VOCA funding supports services for crime victims across the state of Maryland. Funds are used for services such as counseling, advocacy, domestic violence shelters, child advocacy centers, support for rape victims at the hospital, and victim-witness support in court. The WLC depends on VOCA funds to provide free attorneys to survivors of domestic violence in both our CLAS (family law) project and our MEDOVI (immigration) project. Yet on-going challenges with funding and the inconsistent administration of the grants has put organizations that rely on VOCA funding in precarious positions. This legislation will ensure state funds to compensate for VOCA shortages and provide structural improvements to the administration of the grants.

Without VOCA funding our staff would be unable to provide direct representation of survivors of domestic violence as they seek protective orders and divorces against their abusers or seek to obtain custody of their children or legal status in this country. This is the work we do, free of charge, every day for survivors of domestic violence. For example, our CLAS attorneys recently represented a survivor whose abuser was 20 years older than her and a violent drug addict. The parties met when our client was only 19, and she suffered years of extreme physical violence by his hands, including multiple hospitalizations and attempts on her life. Yet she stayed with him because she saw no other way out, particularly in light of the very credible threats he made against the rest of her family. With our help and representation, our client was able to gain custody of their daughter and move on to live an independent life away from her abuser. None of that would have been possible without the generous VOCA funding we receive.

The lingering effects of the pandemic, workforce shortages, and economic disparities have exacerbated existing barriers to victim services. While stabilizing VOCA funding via HB 186 will not be a panacea, it will ensure that the State does not add to these challenges.

For these reasons, the WLC strongly supports HB 186 and urges a favorable report.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change, working to ensure physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy for women in Maryland.