

# Domestic Violence in the Context of COVID-19

April 10, 2020

Domestic violence (DV), also referred to as intimate partner violence, affects approximately [one-third of women and men](#) over their lifetimes in the United States. [Empirical research](#) and [anecdotal information from organizations](#) that serve DV victims indicate that disasters and emergencies can [heighten the frequency and severity of abuse](#). This Insight provides background about DV in the context of COVID-19 and the current federal response to supporting victims, primarily through the [Family Violence Prevention and Services Act \(FVPSA\)](#), [Violence Against Women Act \(VAWA\)](#), and [Victims of Crime Act \(VOCA\)](#). The CARES Act (the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act; P.L. 116-136) provides additional funding under FVPSA and includes a VAWA-related provision. Other coronavirus response packages to date (P.L. 116-123, P.L. 116-127) did not address domestic violence. If Congress wishes to consider further emergency relief or other actions to address the needs of DV victims during the pandemic, it may do so through FVPSA, VAWA, and VOCA programs.

## Background

In the current context of COVID-19, abusers may exert further [power and control](#) over their partners because of economic and other uncertainties surrounding the pandemic. With [stay-at-home orders](#) in effect for most states, victims in those states are more [socially isolated](#) and have [fewer opportunities to connect](#) with others who can potentially assist. They may be less likely to use crisis hotlines with their abusers close by, and may face repercussions if they [reach out for help](#). Further, some DV shelters have reported that they are [at capacity](#) or [bracing for an influx](#) of victims and their children, while trying to enforce social distancing with limited space.

Some law enforcement agencies have reported [increased DV-related calls](#). In Seattle, one of the first U.S. cities hit with the COVID-19 outbreak, the police department [reported a 21% increase in DV-related reports](#) this March compared to March 2019. [Safety protocols](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic can complicate traditional police responses to a DV call. [Changes in court standards](#) for holding an emergency hearing and the halt in many courthouse operations, including a DV court in Chicago, further complicate the criminal justice response to a DV incident during the pandemic.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11323

## Family Violence Prevention and Services Act

**FVPSA** focuses on providing temporary shelter and services for victims, as well as supporting children exposed to domestic and teen dating violence. It authorizes three major activities administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#); [DV shelters, services, and related support](#) (formula grants); and the [Domestic Violence Prevention Enhancement and Leadership Through Alliances](#) (DELTA) program. The FY2020 appropriation is \$12 million for the hotline and \$175 million for the formula grants, and the FY2019 appropriation (the most recently published information) for DELTA was \$5.5 million.

Nearly all formula grant funds are provided through subgrants to organizations for preventing and responding to DV. Subgrantees must provide a nonfederal match of at least \$1 for every \$5 of federal funding. While the FVPSA [statute](#) and [regulations](#) do not address emergency preparedness, they specify a variety of housing types that can be funded: emergency and immediate shelter, including housing, rental subsidies, and temporary lodging in individual units such as apartments; safe homes; and hotel or motel vouchers. Subgrantees providing shelter must also provide support services, such as counseling and case management.

The CARES Act provides additional FY2020 funding of \$2 million for the hotline, including hotline services provided remotely, and \$45 million for formula grants—both available through September 30, 2021. The law specifies that subgrantees are not required to provide a match. In responding to COVID-19, ACF issued [guidance](#) that advises how FVPSA funds can be expended, including for staff, food, toiletries, and supplies at shelters, among other items. Funds may not be given directly to victims. ACF has also issued other [guidance](#) that provides flexibilities for applicants and grantees in programs conducting human service activities related to COVID-19. Separately, FVPSA-funded [training and technical assistance centers](#) are sharing resources for serving DV victims during the pandemic.

## Violence Against Women Act

**VAWA** programs focus on DV, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking, although some VAWA programs address additional crimes. [VAWA grant programs](#) largely address the criminal justice system and community responses to these crimes, but certain programs address prevention as well. Among other purpose areas, several [programs](#) support transitional housing for DV victims and their children. One VAWA program (the [Transitional Housing Assistance Grants for Victims of Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking Program](#)) entirely supports housing needs for victims. It supports organizations that provide 6 to 24 months of transitional housing with support services for victims who are homeless or in need of transitional housing due to DV, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, and for whom emergency shelter services or other crisis intervention services are unavailable or insufficient. The Department of Justice (DOJ) Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) administers most VAWA grants, and in FY2020 [OVW received \\$502.5 million](#) to support VAWA programs. Of note, [OVW has issued several updates related to COVID-19](#) for grantees.

The CARES Act did not provide supplemental FY2020 funding for VAWA programs; however, it requires a [moratorium on evictions](#) of certain tenants, including those living in properties considered to be a “[covered housing program](#)” as defined by VAWA.

## Victims of Crime Act

**VOCA** programs are administered by the DOJ Office for Victims of Crime and support crime victims in states, territories, and tribes. The primary programs through which VOCA supports DV victims are the [victim assistance](#) and [victim compensation](#) formula grant programs. Among other purpose areas,

[these programs](#) may be used to support transitional housing for DV victims and their children. VOCA programs are funded by [the Crime Victims Fund](#), which was established in 1984 and is primarily supported by federal criminal fines. In FY2019, the victim assistance program received \$2.3 billion and the victim compensation program received \$135.4 million.

The CARES Act did not provide supplemental FY2020 funding for VOCA programs.

## Author Information

Adrienne L. Fernandes-Alcantara  
Specialist in Social Policy

Lisa N. Sacco  
Analyst in Illicit Drugs and Crime Policy

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.