



City Council Report

Date: October 19, 2020
To: City Council
Through: Christopher J. Brady, City Manager
From: Jim Smith, City Attorney
John L. Belatti, City Prosecutor
Subject: Federal VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) grant award in the amount of \$1,493,064. The three-year project period is 10/1/2020 through 09/30/2023 (Citywide)

Purpose and Recommendation

The purpose of this report is to notify the Council of a grant award and to request a resolution authorizing its acceptance. The requested resolution will authorize the City Manager to enter into a contract on behalf of the City with the Arizona Department of Public Safety to receive federal funding through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Assistant Grant Program totaling \$1,493,064 for a three-year period. The funding would primarily be used to maintain current staff in the Victim Services Unit (VSU) of the Mesa Prosecutor's Office (5 Victim Services Assistants, 1 Senior Victim Services Assistant, and 1 Victim Notification Clerk), thereby continuing to improve and offer greater services and protections to crime victims in Mesa. The funds would also be used for a new Victim Services Assistant position, which will replace a current temporary Victim Services Assistant position which provides direct services to crime victims in English and Spanish. The funds also include funds for membership with the Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence, which provides resources and training for our Victim Services Staff. It is recommended to approve this resolution, as the funding will provide continued and increased services for crime victims for each of the courtrooms in the Mesa Municipal Court, and will support mandated notification services and other services offered to Mesa crime victims.

Background

Since 1984, the Department of Public Safety (DPS) Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Assistance Grant Program has provided federal funding for victim services programs throughout the United States. Historically, the Mesa Prosecutor's Office Victim Services Unit (VSU) has used VOCA grants to fund two Victim Services Assistant (VSA) positions. In 2015 the annual amount of VOCA funding made available to the states increased from \$725 million to \$2.361 billion. Arizona's share of VOCA grant funding increased from \$9.3 million to \$41 million. In FY2015/2016 the Mesa City Prosecutor's office was awarded \$334,944 to expand services offered to crime victims in Mesa by increasing staff to five Victim Services Assistants, and one additional Victim Notification Clerk, as well as equipment, operating supplies and training. VOCA renewed these

positions in federal FY2016/2017 along with training and operating expenses in the amount of \$321,861 to continue the increased services and VSU staff. The next application year, DPS announced that the VOCA grant program was moving to a three-year grant application process. The Mesa Prosecutor's Office received an award of \$1,279,137 to fund all existing positions and to add a new Senior Victim Services Assistant who would supervise notification and provide services to crime victims assigned to high profile cases and specialty courtrooms.

Victim Services staff provide court escorts; assistance with protective orders and restitution documents; redact confidential information disclosed to the defense; provide referrals to resources in the community for food, shelter, utility assistance, rental assistance, counseling, and many other agencies; provide critical safety planning techniques, and empower victims to regain stability by providing resources, information, and education. The services provided by Victim Services help victims participate in the criminal justice process and gain a pathway towards healing.

Discussion

Mesa is the third largest city in Arizona with a population of nearly 500,000. Prior to the expansion in FY15/16 the VSU provided approximately 14,500 mail notifications annually and served an average of 10,400 victims. The expansion in Victim Services resulted in our ability to send 78,587 mail notifications (542% increase), and to serve 19,556 crime victims (109% increase) in FY20. The staggering increase in mail notifications in FY20 was due to COVID-19 and Court closures. Many cases were reset multiple times requiring a significantly higher number of notices than usual. However, prior to COVID-19, the VSU still averaged 35,000 annually (242%), which is still a tremendous increase in just 5 years. The VSU has expanded services and increased awareness in Mesa.

The Mesa Prosecutor's Office VSU now has a collaborative "team" for each of the courtrooms comprised of prosecutors, a legal support staff and a Victim Services Assistant (VSA), thereby allowing crime victims to be served at every stage in the criminal justice process. The Senior VSA assists in high profile, conflict and specialty courts. The three notification clerks greatly improve and enhance the processes and services to victims, including making initial contact and ensuring that mandated notifications are sent timely. More importantly, VSU now provides additional services that did not exist prior to FY2016 such as assisting all crime victims seeking a protective order, escorting victims to defense interviews, redacting confidential victim information from documents and AXON videos (which are steadily increasing each year), and providing personal advocacy.

Alternatives

The alternative to approving acceptance of the renewed VOCA grant funding is to deny it. The current VSU staff of ten employees is funded at 79% by VOCA. Denying this contract would cause a drastic decrease in the VSU staff nearly eliminating all services for crime victims in our community as the remaining staff would have to be dedicated to

statutorily mandated services. Approving the grant would maintain the current levels of staffing, ensuring that crime victims in Mesa continue to receive needed services and mandatory notifications in a timely manner.

Fiscal Impact

There is no change to the fiscal impact to the City in accepting the VOCA grant funding. All required matching funds are covered by existing positions currently funded by the City of Mesa and state grants, and in-kind services. It is always a concern, particularly where staff positions are involved, whether grant funding will be maintained by the funding source. The Mesa Prosecutor's Office VSU has received funding for victim services positions consistently for over 17 years. The DPS VOCA grant award project period covers a three-year period and administrators have also relayed confidence that funding will remain available to maintain positions.

Coordinated With

Staff has communicated with both the Mesa City Court and Mesa Police Department concerning this compensation grant award. Both departments support acceptance of the grant award.