



DVI caught between rock & hard place

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Economists didn't declare it so until recently, but Lynn Snead has known for a year we were in a recession.

Just like the economists, Snead, the executive director of Domestic Violence Intervention of Lebanon County, pinpoints the start of the economy's decline to last December.

She didn't need unemployment statistics and falling stock prices to reach her conclusion. Instead, Snead's financial barometer was the proceeds from the agency's weekly bingo fundraisers, which are down \$20,000 from a year ago.

"It is a very large part of our budget, and that is really down," she said. "There's a significant piece of the effect of the economy right there. All you have to do is go to bingo, and you can see the economy. It is a great touchstone for the economy. ... It was booming, believe it or not, before last December."

Money from bingo plays a vital role in helping DVI provide shelter and counseling services to hundreds of domestic-abuse victims each year, Snead said. But it is not the only funding stream that is becoming a trickle.

For the past several years, the federal government, which provides about 30 percent of the agency's annual \$1 million budget, has steadily been reducing its contribution for domestic-violence

programs, Snead said.

"Actually, the problems started about three or four years ago with the decrease in federal funding," she said. "We haven't taken decreases at the state level, but we clearly have taken them at the federal level. When you look at the Violence Against Women Act money, there has been nothing but consistent decreases. I would say there is a 30 percent decrease in federal funding across the board."

The funding decline couldn't be coming at a worse time, Snead explained. As the economy has been declining, the demand for DVI's services is growing.

On average, the agency is serving 110 new victims each month, she said. That figure is not much higher than last year, but the incidents are more violent.

This year, the Lebanon Valley experienced three domestic-violence-related deaths, including an infant in Lebanon, a murder-suicide in North Cornwall Township and, most recently, the brutal murder of a Bethel Township woman in Berks County.

"In my estimation, what usually brings women to our door is their desperation for their safety and their kids' safety," Snead said. "But when there is a death in the community, we are deluged because the reality hits home."

An increase in domestic violence during tough economic times is predictable, Snead said. But a sputtering economy is a contributing factor, not the underlying cause, of the violence. Stress induced by losing a job or having difficulty paying the bills can trigger the violence, she said, but the need to dominate a relationship is at the root of the problem.

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"The change in economy is not the biggest factor," she said. "It is still about that power and control."

Snead said she is managing to navigate through these troubling waters through the generosity of the United Way and some large local donations, and by operating with a reduced staff.

Ideally, DVI employs about 15 people to operate its shelter and transition housing, she said. Currently, there are nine employees, only five of whom are full-time. Six of the nine are counselors.

"It's a tidal wave that is starting out slow, and it's getting bigger and bigger and bigger," she said, referring to the decreased funding and rising demand for services. "I'm trying to prepare for it by not filling those positions, so I don't have to do layoffs."

Volunteers help to bridge the gaps — including the faithful crew that operates the bingo games at Quentin Circle shopping center each Friday — but their numbers are declining, too, Snead said.

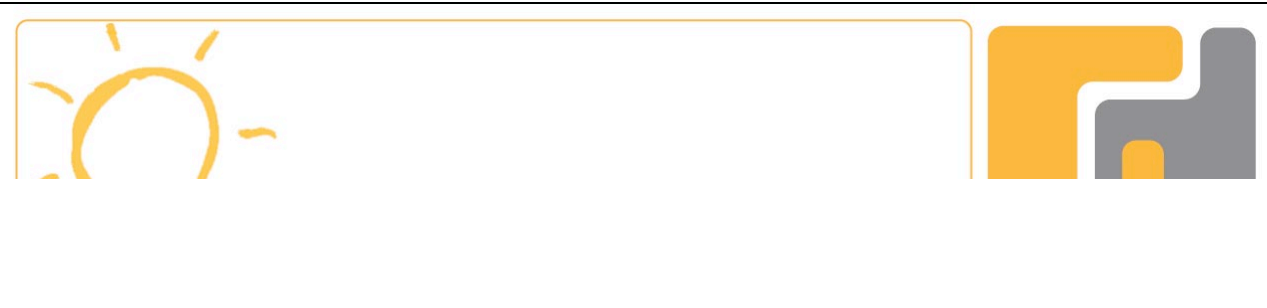
"A lot of the retirees are working to supplement their retirement, so a lot of the people that we had had to go to work," she said.

So far, the agency has been able to meet needs without turning anyone away from the shelter, Snead said. But that time may soon be coming and could have tragic consequences.

"That is sometimes the hardest piece to get your arms around," she said. "That it really is life-and-death decisions we are talking about. And it is so frightening. ... If we have to throw a mattress on the floor, then we do. A victim is asking for service when she is ready, and we have to be there for her."

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