

FROM THE OFFICE OF
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County Eye Newsletter

Many victims of family violence and sexual assault who are assaulted in their place of residence qualify for benefits under the Texas Crime Victims Compensation Program. The program is managed by the Attorney General's office and funding for the program comes from restitution paid by perpetrators, donations, and other sources. One of the most needed benefits is the ability for the victim to relocate to a safe place to escape the control of the perpetrator.

Help in filing the paperwork to receive benefits is offered to victims through the Kerr County Victim Services office in the lower level of the Kerr County Courthouse Annex. The office provides help for victims in Kerr County and for felony victims in Bandera and Gillespie counties at the request of the 198th and 216th district attorney offices.

All felony victims in the three counties are contacted by mail or phone as soon as possible after the criminal incident. Bandera and Gillespie county victims are contacted after the grand jury indictments but many seek help from the office prior to grand jury action.

The Crime Victims Compensation program (CVC) also provides help with paying medical bills, counseling costs, funeral expenses, and several other benefits. The most popular benefit for family violence and sexual assault victims is the relocation benefit.

CVC will pay up to \$3800 to help the victim and family, especially children, find a new, safer place to live. The first \$2000 pays for rental deposits, utility hook-up fees, renting a moving vehicle, fuel for the moving van and personal vehicles, and temporary storage unit costs, if needed. The benefit, in some circumstances, will also reimburse airfare if the victim needs to move a longer distance.

The remaining \$1800 is designed to help the victim with the first three months rent to give the person time to get back on their feet, get a job, or heal from the assault. Additional rent each month is the responsibility of the victim.

In all three of the Hill Country counties the challenge is not qualifying for the benefit but finding suitable, affordable housing for the victims. Housing is a huge issue and not improving as the three counties continue to gain population in the months ahead. The population in all the counties is growing partly because of the job market and partly because of the numbers of retired people moving into the area.

People often move and rent until they can find or build a permanent residence. In many communities there are housing authorities that manage affordable housing options. No such housing authorities exist in our area.

Affordable housing vouchers are available in many of the counties served through the Alamo Area of Council of Government's (AACOG) housing program but those vouchers are not currently available in Kerr County and persons needing housing cannot even be put on a waiting list because the number of apartments and houses available are non-existent. Bandera and Gillespie counties face the same housing issues.

Victims also face the issue of needing adequate housing for their children. Often it's said that family violence victims return to live with the perpetrator because of economic reasons. One of the economic issues is their inability to find affordable alternate housing and jobs to support that reduced lifestyle for themselves and their children.

Hill Country Cares provides temporary emergency shelter for many family violence and sexual assault victims but many victims from other communities also come to Kerrville to the shelter. Those victims also are provided services, if needed, through the Kerr County Victim Services office.

As a community we have opened our hearts and resources to victims of violent crimes but those resources are very limited. The additional numbers of people who are coming into our community from drug and alcohol treatment facilities who need housing, jobs and support further stretches our community's resources.

Leaders of churches and organizations in our community who provide temporary help for persons down on their luck will testify that the numbers of people seeking help is increasing even though the local economy is recovering. Food banks, medical facilities, agencies that provide clothing, help with utilities and other aid are faced with ever increasing numbers of people seeking help.

Unfortunately that same issue impacts county resources, especially in our indigent services programs. We have seen a spike in applications for indigent health benefits in recent months and the number of people requesting court-appointed attorneys has increased.

By state and federal law the county must provide indigent health services and indigent defense/court-appointed attorneys for those who qualify. Both costs are moving targets and hard to predict. Increased costs of law enforcement as the population grows is also a big factor in county decisions.

County fathers struggle with the increased demands of county services and the desire to keep the tax increase manageable. These issues have also been addressed during the 2017 budget discussion.

The proposed budget and tax rate will be available shortly in the media and on the county website www.co.kerr.tx.us