

# Abuse victims' legal program stripped of its federal funding

By Charlotte J. Eller

Blue Ridge Legal Services has lost federal funding for a program that provides free legal advice to victims of domestic violence who need help dealing with their abusers.

Two attorneys who represent domestic abuse victims in court battles with abusers will lose their jobs as a result of a U.S. Department of Justice decision not to renew an 18-month, \$160,000 grant.

The cut also will force the agency to curtail the number of other cases it handles.

Telling his staff "was terrible," said John E. Whitfield, the nonprofit organization's executive director. "Everyone was in a state of shock."

**"THE IMPACT WILL BE FELT [BY] THOSE WHO CAN'T AFFORD LEGAL SERVICES."**

**Kevin Black, Woodstock attorney.**

One attorney, Anna Hammond, is in the agency's Winchester office and the other works in Harrisonburg. The agency serves an area ranging from Winchester to Roanoke.

"Everyone I talked to has been distraught," said Hammond, a staff attorney for four years. When she got the news, "I just sat there for a second. I was obviously upset. ... But it is the impact on our clients that I worry about. I

can always get another job."

To continue the program as long as possible, she will work part-time. Some coworkers donated part of their paid leave to her. Attorney Nancy Glickman, who heads the Winchester office, donated all her annual leave.

That will allow Hammond to stay until Dec. 31 rather than an Oct. 31 departure.

The loss means the remaining attorneys' efforts will be

**ABUSE, A6**



Woodstock attorney Kevin Black sits outside Response headquarters in Woodstock. Black, a member of the Blue Ridge Legal Services Board, has learned the agency is losing federal funding that pays for legal services for victims of domestic violence.

Daily staff photo by Rich Cooley

# Abuse

**Continued from A1**

spread even more thinly.

Domestic violence cases still will be given priority by the remaining staff, Whitfield said.

But inevitably the result will be that the agency will aid fewer clients since it also handles matters such as bankruptcy, landlord-tenant disputes, benefits eligibility and senior citizen issues.

The grant first was awarded to Blue Ridge in 1999 by the department's Violence Against Women Office. It was renewed in 2001 for another 18 months.

News of the cut was in a Sept. 13 letter in from the department's Office of Justice Programs. Whitfield, who announced the grant's loss in a news release, called it "devastating news."

"This is a major blow," said Winchester Assistant Commonwealth Attorney Mary Daniel, a member of Blue Ridge's board of directors. She prosecutes cases of domestic violence and intimate partner sexual assault.

"I frankly consider this [decision] to be one of the most significant things happening in our local legal community and the domestic violence field right now," she said.

An attorney not only handles matters the victim cannot, but having an advocate is "empowering" for victims of abuse, Daniel said.

Attorney Kevin Black of Woodstock, who also serves on the board, agreed. "This is a huge loss. The impact will be felt [by] those who can't afford legal services. And it's definitely a negative impact.

"I don't understand [the decision]," he said. "It's too hard to fathom the rationale. Blue Ridge provides a vital

service to our community."

Over the last three years, the grant has allowed the agency to assist 728 domestic violence victims. Grant provisions allowed it to aid victims with incomes of up to 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines rather than the usual 125 percent.

That enabled an adult making up to \$30,000 per year with two children to receive aid. As a result of the grant's loss, the agency will only be able to serve those with an income of about \$19,000, under usual guidelines, Whitfield said.

One major reason the department cited for not renewing the grant was the program's heavy reliance on it for funding. "What kind of logic is that?" Whitfield asked.

"The Department of Justice apparently is more inclined to fund a program if it doesn't need its financial support to survive," he said, "and to decline to fund a program that has no other realistic source of support to sustain it."

Blue Ridge also receives funding from the United Way and some local governments.

Justice officials said more than 200 applications were received but only 92 grants could be awarded. "They're turning down people all across the country," Whitfield said.

"It's a shame," he said. But without the funds, continuing it would be impossible.

Besides sharply limiting legal advice the agency can give, the cut will affect shelters for abuse victims in Woodstock, Harrisonburg, Front Royal, Winchester, Luray and Staunton. Each got part of \$20,000 of the grant for helping clients apply for legal aid.

► Contact Charlotte Eller at [celler@nvdaily.com](mailto:celler@nvdaily.com)