

By Polly Poskin
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All we asked for was \$1,000,000. A modest increase to support 29 rape crisis centers and their 26 satellite offices across this very large state. Equally divided, that would have been \$18,181 per site at the 55 sites, not enough for a full-time advocate, or a full-time counselor, or a full-time prevention educator. Barely a start on the cost of living for each center: basics like salary increases, rent hikes, increased utilities, like heating costs.

All we got was a 2% increase. And not even 2% over the entire FY02 fiscal year. Nope. Just 2% for the period April 1 – June 30, 2002. That totals \$27,000 among 29 centers. Each one will get \$931. Nothing for the 26 satellites.

How many additional sexually abused children will each center be able to serve? How many new date rape prevention programs will a center be able to offer in the community? How many volunteer training manuals will a center be able to print for the 24-hour hotline volunteers. \$931 isn't enough to take on any of those projects.

I understand the budget process – the give and take and the many trade-offs that occur to make progress and keep peace at once. I know that the budget negotiation is a delicate matter involving a multitude of interests – personal, political, charitable. I know we have roads to pave, bridges to build, debts to pay, state agencies to run.

I also know the costs to communities when rape crisis services are held at status quo. Communities need sexual assault crisis centers. They need immediate access to a counselor or advocate when a child, a mother, a sister, a brother, a friend is raped. They need educational services to know how to prevent rape and how to report it when it occurs. They need information about date rape drugs. Incest. Elder abuse. Stalking. Sexual harassment. Rape.

The state's FY02 budget is \$53 billion. That is an increase of \$4 billion over FY01. Of that increase, .000675% will support rape crisis centers. I say this is not enough. Our priorities are skewed if we cannot dig into that \$4 billion increase and find more than \$27,000 for the heart and soul of victim assistance. Many argue that building roads and bridges is an investment in the future. And it is. So is counseling for a rape victim, for a sexually abused child. So is advocacy to help a victim participate in the prosecution of an offender. So is prevention education for children and adults. A victim who receives services today will be healthier tomorrow – less apt to use sick leave, more apt to attain education and employment goals, better able to contribute to the community.

We need a balanced budget. But we do not need to trade off victim services to achieve that balance. Let's open up the budget process. Let's have a citizen review. Does the budget reflect our priorities and our needs as communities of people? If not, why? And what will it take to change that?