

VOCA & MICHIGAN

In 2016 and 2017, Michigan Advocacy Program (MAP) received Victims of Crime Act Victim Assistance Formula Grants (VOCA) funding for 14 attorneys serving survivors of domestic violence and another 12 dedicated to helping elder abuse survivors. These attorneys work out of 18 legal aid offices across Michigan. This Michigan statewide program arose out of a culture of collaboration and partnerships that Michigan’s legal aid organizations had nurtured for years.

THE PLAN. Prior to 2015, none of the legal services providers in the state had received VOCA funds. MAP and several other Michigan programs had received Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grants, but that funding enabled them to address only a fraction of the need. The significant increase in available VOCA funding plus revisions to the prior restriction that VOCA funds could not be used to help survivors obtain divorces allowed the legal services community, supported by our domestic violence agency partners, to see VOCA funding as a way to address a real unmet need. Michigan’s legal aid programs recognized that where someone lived should not determine their access to justice and this notion inspired a statewide collaboration.

MI’s Victim Assistance Grant Amount

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|------|---------------|
| 2014 | \$13,751,000 |
| 2015 | \$59,808,000 |
| 2016 | \$67,368,000 |
| 2017 | \$55,755,000 |
| 2018 | \$100,319,000 |

Michigan had a track record on statewide collaborations before the VOCA-funded opportunity. During the recession, the Michigan Foreclosure Prevention Project (MFPP) brought together seven legal aid programs throughout the state to work together in a statewide foreclosure prevention unit. This [project](#) provided technical support, coordination of advocacy efforts, direct legal representation, and support to housing counselors. MAP also has several other statewide programs, such as the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, Farmworker Legal Services, the Michigan Elder Justice Initiative, and the Michigan Legal Help Program.

The idea for the statewide program to provide legal services for victims of crime piggybacked off of the success of previous collaborations. Because of this history, the partners had an easier time conceptualizing how a statewide VOCA-funded effort could work.

THE PITCH. MAP set up a meeting with the VOCA administrator to discuss options and what the administrator had in mind. In the meeting, the VOCA administrator encouraged them to “go big” with their pitch. The VOCA administrator was familiar with MAP’s expertise in the areas of advocacy for domestic violence victims and vulnerable older adults, both demographics targeted for VOCA services. Civil legal services had also been identified as an unmet need when the state office conducted a needs assessment. After this meeting, MAP approached other legal aid programs throughout the state about a potential partnership.

MAP came back to the VOCA administrator with a proposal for a collaboration among the five LSC-funded legal aid organizations in Michigan—Michigan Advocacy Program, Lakeshore Legal Aid, Legal Aid of Western Michigan, Legal Services of Eastern Michigan, and Legal Services of Northern Michigan. These organizations were also part of the MFPP collaboration. MAP chose to focus on domestic violence and elder abuse because of the enormous need and existing expertise in these areas.

THE DESIGN. In the first grant, MAP applied for funding to support 14 attorneys serving survivors of domestic violence and elder abuse. When a second round of crime victims assistance funding was quickly announced, MAP subsequently amended the first grant to focus on domestic violence and secured a second VOCA grant to fund 10 lawyers to focus on elder abuse cases. Together, these grants created MAP's [Crime Victims Legal Assistance Project \(CVLAP\)](#).

CVLAP's domestic violence program is supported by a \$996,298 VOCA grant that provides one supervising attorney based out of Ypsilanti and 13 staff attorneys in civil legal aid offices across Michigan including the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center (MIRC). The MIRC CVLAP attorney assists with VAWA, U Visas, and other permissible victim-based immigration benefits. CVLAP's elder abuse program is supported by a \$985,076 VOCA grant that provides one supervising attorney based out of Ypsilanti and 9 staff attorneys throughout Michigan. Funding also supports training and case support by MAP's elder law and family law specialists.

These staff attorneys are MAP staff who are considered donated staff to each partner program. VOCA staff are jointly supervised by the local offices and MAP. The local offices provide additional in-kind support such as office space. There have been some challenges resulting from the structure of MAP employees working out of other legal aid programs' offices such as reconciling the partner programs' personnel policies and case handling systems. Right now, the 20 percent match comes from MAP's pro bono attorneys and their non-VOCA funded work on behalf of survivors of DV. The match for elder work has been waived.

For reporting, all of the partner legal aid programs use the same case management system so MAP is able to pull data from all five programs and submit the required quarterly reports. Still, reporting for these grants is a complicated and time-consuming endeavor, and the first grant for legal services that Michigan's Department of Health & Human Services has managed.

TOP TIPS

1. A coordinated, statewide collaboration means legal aid programs are not competing for the same funds. Instead, we're working together to address a need across Michigan from urban Detroit to the rural Upper Peninsula.
2. Instead of working alone in many isolated locations, the CVLAP attorneys are part of a statewide network of attorneys (a community of practice) serving victims of crime. This means better services for clients thanks to joint trainings, shared listservs, on-call supervision, and pooled litigation and expert witness funds.

"MAP's Crime Victims Legal Assistance Project has brought attention to the need for civil legal services as an essential remedy for victims of domestic violence and elder abuse seeking to recover and regain their lives. Building on an existing framework of collaboration and high quality representation, Michigan's legal services programs, with the financial support of the VOCA grants, quickly created an impactful program dedicated to providing access to justice for these underserved populations." – Ann Routt, Executive Director, MAP

THE IMPACT. In the most recent quarter of the program, CVLAP helped 857 individuals who were victims of domestic violence and/or elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation. For example, CVLAP represented a senior client with disabilities facing involuntary discharge from a nursing home. The nursing home unlawfully attempted to discharge him over the Thanksgiving holiday, without doing any discharge planning to ensure that he would be provided with adequate care at this next placement, placing him at serious risk of harm. The CVLAP attorney

halted and challenged the involuntary discharge. Through both legal advocacy in the proceedings and negotiation, the attorney secured an additional six months at the nursing home for the client, which allowed time to locate a suitable facility that could provide him with adequate care near his family, as well as ensure that the transition between facilities was smooth. The client is now living happily in a smaller facility that provides him the medical care he needs; the new location also allows him to enjoy more regular visits from his siblings.

