

GUEST ESSAY

'It Sounds Really Dire Because It Is Really Dire'

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 Listen · 6:27 min**By Rachel Louise Snyder**

Ms. Snyder is a contributing Opinion writer.

Recently, the roof started leaking in a shingled white house in Androscoggin County, Maine. The boiler also went out. There is nothing remarkable about this house, except that it shelters victims of human trafficking. At capacity, it has room for six. It is always at capacity. In years past, the organization that runs the house, Safe Voices, would have ponied up the \$30,000 required to fix these issues. But the uncertainty unleashed by the Trump administration's policies made it difficult to make financial commitments like this.

So all six residents and one dog piled into a minivan owned by Safe Voices and lugged their belongings in multiple trips to a 17-bed domestic violence shelter nearby, where they had to double up in rooms; the house now sits empty.

The reason Rebecca Austin, the executive director of Safe Voices, could not immediately fix the roof or the boiler is that she had no idea what her organization's financial situation would be after Oct. 1 when the new fiscal year starts. Since President Trump took office, the group's federal grants have been briefly frozen, then unfrozen. Then the release of new grant applications was delayed for three months without explanation. "No one seems to know the answers to what's going to happen and if money is actually going to come through," she told me.

Much of the federal infrastructure that supports domestic violence programs is damaged or gone. The director of the Office of Family Violence and Prevention Services was placed on administrative leave this spring. One domestic violence advocate told me her organization has gone through four points of contact at the Department of Justice since February.

This chaos is happening throughout the country and is largely out of public view. While the enormous losses to science, education, development, the arts, health and other areas dominate headlines, the local consequences — busted boilers, leaking roofs — are less visible. But they can be catastrophic for organizations that operate on shoestring budgets. It's what makes the Trump administration's approach to rooting out waste, fraud, and diversity, equity and inclusion so maddening and brutish.

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Neil McLean, the district attorney in Lewiston, Maine, told me he employs one of his office's two full-time domestic violence prosecutors through a Safe Voices grant. This prosecutor is assigned to over 700 cases across one county. For context, this is more than 10 times the typical caseload of a local public defender. "It's as bad as it sounds," Mr. McLean said. "This is not one of the areas where we need cuts."

Safe Voices has several advocates working within the criminal justice system, helping with over 100 domestic violence cases in the past month alone. The advocates support survivors throughout the legal process by offering resources, explaining legal proceedings and more. This work is supported by a grant that Safe Voices has had for 12 years. No one knows what will happen if the grant isn't renewed in October.

Another organization, NextStep Domestic Violence Project in Ellsworth, Maine, which offers housing, support groups and a hotline to victims of abuse, is so short-staffed that its advocates have begun to explain the legal process to clients in case

they have to represent themselves in court. Kelly Brown, the executive director, is spread so thin that the first time I called her, she was busy answering its hotline.

The 2025 grant applications from the Office on Violence Against Women finally began being released on May 7, and Ms. Austin is in the process of reapplying. Having the opportunity to reapply made her feel secure enough to start repairs on Safe Voices' house. She hopes residents will be able to move back in by the fall. But there are only around 55 new rural grants from the Office on Violence Against Women available for the entire United States. Safe Voices will be among at least three domestic violence groups competing for those grants in Maine. She estimated that if she loses all federal funding, Safe Voices will go from 36 employees to 20.

Many people don't understand the vast ecosystem involved in the issuing of federal and state grants. The Office on Violence Against Women can provide grants directly to organizations like Safe Voices. It also provides grants to groups like the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence. The coalition then distributes grants to its member organizations or other local partners. Services covered by the grants include forensic nurse examiners, abuser intervention programs, community education, transitional housing, counseling, specialized police units, food pantries and even utilities.

There's more. In the grant applications released last month, organizations are required to certify that they will comply with the Trump administration's executive orders, which bar the promotion of gender ideology or "illegal D.E.I.," along with any activities that "frame domestic violence or sexual assault as systemic social justice issues."

It is frankly nonsensical to ask providers to ignore the social conditions that create domestic violence. How do you talk to teenagers about preventing dating abuse or stalking without discussing social and cultural forces? Francine Garland Stark, who heads the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, said the instructions put her organization and partners in an untenable position — forced to choose between following the executive orders and potentially violating state or even federal law (which prohibits discrimination against, for example, L.G.B.T.Q. people) and their moral convictions. "Do we take the hit and become a shell of ourselves?" she asked.

Safe Voices was working on a project for the past year: a new six-unit apartment building. It had plans from the architect and a builder lined up. It spent about \$200,000 on the project and was ready to break ground. Then all the uncertainty happened. “We pulled the plug on the project because it was so risky to move forward,” said Ms. Austin. It won’t get any of the money back that it spent. “It sounds really dire because it is really dire,” she said. Meanwhile, in the past month, Safe Voices had more than 100 new requests for shelter.

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