



RECOMMENDATION FOR VICTIM SERVICES BUDGET

Commission for Women

Recommendation Number 20190710-03a02: The Commission for Women recommends the full funding for 5 full-time Victim Services Counselors and 1 part-time coordinator to the Victim Services Division of the Austin Police Department.

WHEREAS, the City of Austin ("City") Commission for Women ("Commission") serves as an advisory body to the City Council ("Council") and City Manager concerning the needs and problems of women in the Austin area and shall recommend programs designed to alleviate any inequities that may confront women in social, economic and vocational pursuits. The Commission shall develop goals and coordinate research for planning, programming, and action relating to opportunities, needs, problems, and contributions of women in the city; and

WHEREAS, the Commission passed Recommendation 20180214-04c: Hiring of 5 FTE Victim Services Counselors in February 2018, stating that City and grant-funded victim counselors are critical to APD's response to violent crime and its aftermath. At the time of the recommendation, only three victim services counselors were assigned to work sex crimes, despite the fact that there are an average of 25-30 reported sexual assaults occurring in Austin every month. Direct services hours performed by these counselors include crisis intervention, counseling, and advocacy for the duration of the criminal justice process. Counselors provide information about crime victim rights and assistance with crime victim compensation. They also follow up with information and referrals to help victims, survivors and their families recover more quickly and completely from the effects of victimization. It is necessary for the sustainability of the victim services program that these positions be filled with full-time employees. The average rate of pay for a temporary counselor is \$27 per hour. It is difficult to retain counselors at this rate of pay when benefits are not offered (over 30% of APD counselors keep a second job or work overtime assignments to supplement their income). It is an even greater challenge with temporary status assignments, as the counselors continue to look for a job with benefits after accepting a temp grant-funded position. The addition of each new victim counselor will provide direct services to between 350 – 400 victims annually, depending on area of assignment; and

WHEREAS, the Commission has passed recommendations on eliminating the rape kit backlog and addressing the DNA lab closure (20160810-003a: APD DNA Lab Closure); the hiring of the city manager and APD chief (20161219-003A: Candidate Requirements for the City Manager and Police Chief); and victim services recommendations in the form of Council Committee Agenda Request (20170809-003b: Request by the Commission regarding survivors of sexual assault); and

WHEREAS, per Recommendation 20180214-04c, the Commission recommended that five full time victim services counselor positions be added to the Victim Services Division of the Austin Police Department in 2018 to build on the City's response to needs of sexual assault survivors. The Commission further recommended that to help support the sustainability of the Victim Services Division of the Austin Police Department, the City would ensure the five additional victim services counselors receive all the benefits associated with full time employment, regardless of the funding source for the positions; and

WHEREAS, the City Budget passed in 2018 with partial funding of 3 incremental FTE positions; and

WHEREAS, as of 2019, victim services counselors are being dispatched with law enforcement as soon as sexual assault calls are made, with expected 24x7 coverage; this is beneficial to victims, but puts added strain on counselors who are already overextended due to staffing constraints; and,

WHEREAS, per Recommendation 20170809-003b, the Commission requested \$50,000 be allocated for the express purpose of training local counselors within both the non-profit and private sectors to provide trauma counseling in exchange for their agreement to take an appropriate number of pro-bono sexual assault clients in need of these services. This training was funded in the 2018 budget and is under way; however, the full benefit of the training is not being realized because the department is facing challenges referring victims to counselors who have received the training.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, the Commission recommends full funding for 5 FTE counselors in the 2019 Budget, to meet the needs of increasing numbers of victims as the City population grows. The Commission further recommends funding of a part-time coordinator (e.g., 0.5 FTE) to manage the process of referring victims to counselors who have received the funded training, in order to fully realize the benefit of that training and serve more victims. These recommendations were submitted through the Budget Office process on April 23, 2019, in alignment with the Strategic Outcome area Safety: Timeliness and quality of emergency response.

Date of Approval: July 10, 2019

Record of the vote: Unanimous on an 8-0 vote, three commissioners absent

Attest: _____


Vicky Nguyen, Staff Liaison