

Little Hoover Commission Hearing Testimony

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WEAVE

Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

About WEAVE

WEAVE's mission is to promote safe and healthy relationships and support survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and sex trafficking. WEAVE provides 24/7 comprehensive intervention services to victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, and sex trafficking in the Sacramento region.

In the Fiscal Year ending this Saturday, September 30th WEAVE has provided housing to 211 adults and children, including 13,456 bed nights of emergency shelter, 6,063 bed nights of transitional housing, and 9,412 bed nights of permanent supportive housing, thanks to our Creekside project built in 2021 through the Governor's Homekey program. 695 clients participated in ongoing individual and 15-week psychoeducational group counseling. WEAVE's legal team fielded more than 3,500 calls from individuals seeking legal assistance and provided legal services to 646 clients. We accompanied 353 sexual assault victims to evidentiary exams to collect DNA from their bodies, assisted 138 adult and child sex trafficking victims, and Advocates embedded in four law enforcement agencies provided follow-up services and court accompaniments to 493 survivors. 21,221 youth and adults participated in 867 primary prevention and education activities. Staff and volunteers fielded 12,017 calls and chats to WEAVE's crisis lines and 135,000 users visited weaveinc.org for 167,000 sessions seeking help and information.

WEAVE strives to ensure that all services are accessible to any victim in need which includes designing shelter programs to accommodate all genders and gender identities, offering services in multiple locations throughout the community, and partnering with culturally specific organizations to ensure that WEAVE is viewed as a welcoming place for all. Although we are considered a mainstream domestic violence agency, WEAVE implements specialized programs to address improved access for victims with disabilities, American Indian/Alaskan Natives, victims of Elder Abuse, and LGBTQ+ survivors, and is working to improve services to the Black community. Even with very intentional program design and earmarked funding, demand for general and specialized services exceeds capacity, and victims who are experiencing domestic violence along with other intersecting issues such as racism, poverty, living with a disability, LGBTQ+ identity, etc. are more vulnerable and face greater barriers.

WEAVE's budget for this upcoming fiscal year 2024 is \$11,222,200. The bulk of the funding, 66%, is from an array of more than 20 government grants and contracts. WEAVE raises 20% of its budget through a robust fund development program via major and planned gifts, corporate and foundation sponsorships and grants, special events and direct mail. In addition, WEAVE operates three retail resale shops that generate 10% of the budget and contribute more than \$30,000 worth of clothing to clients.

Intimate Partner Violence: Getting the Money to Those on the Front Line—Report #1

As I mentioned in my 2019 testimony, we find that there are many challenges and inefficiencies in state processes and requirements that could benefit from adjustments that would result in money and time savings for WEAVE, sister organizations and the state itself. In its reports, the Commission recommended that the state provide funding for its key anti-domestic violence grant program through up-front payments and streamline the data reporting process. We have seen improvement since the implementation of the Commission's recommendation that WEAVE, and other agencies that receive the Domestic Violence Assistance Fund receive the entirety of the state's portion of the grant funding at the beginning of the grant period. Thanks to AB 673, this past year, for example, WEAVE received \$201,980 up front, which represents 37% of the total grant subaward. Unfortunately, this does not apply to the many other CalOES grant programs that are funded solely through federal dollars, which does not help smaller agencies with cash flow challenges as they are still floating those grants. We are appreciative that the state has done what it can with the revenues over which they have control.

In my previous testimony I also discussed the state's onerous and repetitive reporting and data requirements. Since then, CalOES has streamlined the program reporting for our eight 100% VOCA funded grants. They removed quantitative data from the semi-annual progress reports and instead we now only provide qualitative/narrative responses, and the numbers are reported separately—quarterly via the OVC VOCA system. In addition, they have allowed us to move from monthly to quarterly financial reporting, which has been helpful from a workload standpoint, but they require us to reapply for that option every time a contract is renewed rather than just allowing us to make it a permanent change, which feels inefficient.

Beyond the Crisis: A Long-Term Approach to Reduce, Prevent, and Recover from Intimate Partner Violence—Report #2

The findings in the January 2021 Beyond the Crisis report are very much in line with WEAVE's philosophy of service delivery, policy priorities and promising practices. The recommendations remain very relevant although I am not sure, given the financial outlook, specifically for VOCA funding, if all of them are attainable at this moment, and it appears that minimal steps have been taken to act on many of the recommendations. My specific feedback on the findings and the recommendations is as follows:

Policy Reforms

The need for policy reforms remains relevant and critical. The types of abuse we are seeing and the tactics used by abusers are changing as the world changes. We see far too many situations where there are tragic and lethal consequences, especially for victims who share children with their abuser. We need to continue learning from research and science about what poses threats to safety. For example, certain indicators are linked to increased probability of lethality, specifically, the use of strangulation as an element of physical abuse, the presence of firearms in the home, and threats to kill the victim, children or self. The state should be looking at judicial guidelines for protective orders when we know these high-risk factors are present. We still treat custody and domestic violence as separate issues, but they cannot be separated from a policy perspective. We need to acknowledge the reality that those who harm their partners are inherently also harming their children. The research and science do not support the notion that an abuser can harm their partner but still be a "good" parent. The state should examine the training requirements and regulation of professional visitation supervisors and the safety of having non-professional people serving in that role, especially when there are risk factors present. And, finally, we all

need a better understanding of how emerging technologies are and will be weaponized by abusers. Judicial officers should receive ongoing training around technologically facilitated abuse as the world changes, and we should craft policy that ensures the safety of survivors and their families.

Governance

A strategic, comprehensive approach to addressing domestic violence is critical to moving the needle in a meaningful way. Absent state-level coordination and leadership, this kind of strategic planning will not be successful. I believe this is a complex, nuanced and deeply rooted issue; it requires dedicated resources and attention over a meaningful period of time. One leader of this effort will not be successful if they are under-resourced or if they are asked to manage this work along with other duties. A more specific and sustainable strategy might be to create a standing Commission or Advisory Board to advise the governor and legislature on issues related to domestic violence. The Commission on Aging is perhaps a good model. It is a body comprised of subject matter experts who have the directive to advocate for older adults and advise the State on issues that impact older adults. Coupled with this could be a standing joint policy committee at the legislature level, which would review and provide input on new policies in any area that may have consequences for survivors. Too often we see well-intentioned legislation enacted that has unintended consequences for survivors because the policy was never considered through the lens of its impact on that group.

With regard to the recommendation that the state create a framework for data collection and analysis, I would suggest leveraging data the state already has to inform the strategic goals and future programming. The state collects massive amounts of data from funding recipients but does not appear to compile or analyze any of it.

Prevention and Early Intervention

Prevention and Early Intervention efforts are critical to the continuum of addressing domestic violence in the state and are illustrative of why a strategic, comprehensive approach is needed. They must make sense with the rest of the continuum, which spans Education, Prevention, Early Intervention, Crisis Response and all of the Interventions that are called for in state statute such as Counseling, Emergency Shelter, Legal Assistance and tangible supports such as transportation, food and clothing. As noted in recommendation number one, while the government funding for prevention work is woefully inadequate, we can't simply swap intervention funding for an investment in prevention. We must prioritize and fund these efforts in addition.

It is critical that leaders in the State of California take the stance that violence is, in fact, preventable. When we fail to believe that to be true, we rely on the fear and punishment-based strategies that are currently in place. We need to pivot to multi-generational approaches and community-driven solutions to support healthy relationships. The solution includes incorporating education about healthy relationships, conflict resolution and safety into mainstream learning to ensure that we are reaching the broadest population possible. If children are not learning about healthy relationships in their home environment, we need to teach this elsewhere. We don't expect every parent to teach their child chemistry without the support of an educator, why would this topic be any different?

Firearms

With regard to firearms, SB 320 strengthens the processes for removing guns from those with domestic violence restraining orders. This was a meaningful step forward in this effort but the reality is firearm relinquishment is still largely disjointed and relies on an “honor system” in many, many cases. State level efforts are important, but local agencies are often best suited to address these situations quickly. They need to be incentivized to prioritize this work – perhaps by attaching conditions to funding or devising other prioritization methods that make it clear this is critical to the safety of victims, community members and officers alike.

Economic Security

I applaud efforts to increase the understanding of leaders at all levels of government to better understand the intersection of domestic violence and homelessness. We should be looking for solutions that prioritize people who want to be housed rather than focusing the greatest numbers of resources on those who do not. Certainly those experiencing chronic homelessness need supports and services but the victims and survivors who seek refuge at WEAVE and other agencies want to be housed and often don't qualify for programs designed to serve this other subset of our unhoused community. They are staying in dangerous homes because they do not have the resources, skills and freedom to find a safe place to live. They are a hidden group of people experiencing homelessness and we have a strong infrastructure in place in this state to help them if only we had the funds.

Leaving someone who provided for you and your children and who is violent and abusive is overwhelmingly expensive and the barriers are high. Consider the daunting task of securing affordable housing and childcare, finding employment that will meet your needs particularly if you've been out of the workforce, finishing your education to get a better job, buying a vehicle, gas, and insurance, making sure you have a phone of your own, internet access, and food for your children, addressing the fallout from financial abuse including coerced debt and a terrible credit score, navigating the legal system to get protection and custody of your children, all while trying to heal emotionally and possibly physically. Current systems are disjointed and pieced together--usually by victims.

The expansion of the Housing First program, increased flexible financial assistance, and the creation of other supports that help to eliminate barriers to victims and survivors securing housing are the answer. In this past year WEAVE received 1,096 referrals to our Housing First program and served 194 clients. That's 194 people who did not end up homeless in Sacramento County alone. These clients worked with a case manager to determine their goals and a plan and carry out steps to achieve those goals with the ultimate objective of securing permanent housing so they do not have to return to the home they shared with their abuser. Their goals may include addressing legal issues around the violence, such as filing a restraining order, obtaining employment to support themselves, paying off debts incurred as part of their abuse, returning to school to complete their education, or addressing the many other barriers to long-term stability.

The success of WEAVE's Housing First program hinges on the ability of clients to receive--and successfully use--housing vouchers to secure affordable housing. However, WEAVE's Housing Navigation staff report that the current process, which is controlled by the local Housing Authority, is lengthy, time-consuming, difficult to navigate and disheartening for clients. As a result, clients in temporary shelter often face exit dates and homelessness before they have received a voucher, and clients in WEAVE's Safehouse take up

space that could be freed up for other survivors. Also, the Housing Authority will only communicate via paper and the USPS which is a huge barrier for clients staying at temporary addresses. While the state may not have any authority over this process, it should be aware that while vouchers are a viable solution for many victims they are also a challenge.

The Future of Funding

Unfortunately, we are facing a severe funding crisis due to an expected significant decrease in the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Federal grant program. VOCA is the nation's funding source to supporting victims of crime ranging from sexual assault, domestic violence, human trafficking, child abuse, elder abuse, and much more. A dramatic increase in VOCA funding eight years ago allowed CalOES to greatly expand its competitive grant programs, for WEAVE we grew from having just two CalOES grants to as many as 14 in some years. For example, the grants funded targeted programs including Housing First, Unserved/Underserved Populations, Elder Abuse and Transitional Housing. The stakes are high if Congress does not allocate \$1.9 billion in funding for Fiscal Year 24-25. Programs across the state are preparing for devastating cuts to their VOCA funds ranging anywhere between 30-40% and CalOES anticipates the number of subaward decreasing in funding levels as well as the number of awards themselves. For your reference, WEAVE currently has 12 CalOES grants. Eight of them are 100% VOCA funded. Our Domestic Violence Assistance Program is 48% VOCA this year and our Rape Crisis grant is 95% VOCA. These programs simply cannot sustain the cuts anticipated. If the state's impression is that these gaps might be filled by local dollars, that is a fallacy. The only funding for the state mandated domestic violence services that WEAVE receives from the County of Sacramento is a percentage of the Marriage License Fees—a fee that has not increased during my 17 years as CEO. The state might consider raising that fee in an effort to increase funds flowing to domestic violence agencies.

It does not appear that CalOES has yet determined which programs they will continue to fund through the dwindling VOCA funds. It appears that the state has great discretion to dictate how any cuts will be implemented. I urge everyone at the table to think critically about the most effective use of these limited resources and prioritize data-driven decisions to fund practices and programs with demonstrated success.

Finally, while the Commission's recommendations are absolutely relevant, I am not hopeful that the recommendations to expand the Housing First program, create and adequately fund prevention and early intervention programs, or require all state-administered domestic violence grants to provide a living wage and annual cost-of-living increases to awardees to be implemented at a time when we are expecting such deep funding cuts. However, I think that there is much good work to be done and hope that the commission will be able to prioritize the things that we can address to move this work forward. Thank you.