

Story
Discussion

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REGION: Crime Victims Fund gets emergency help to those in need

Patti Colston waited in line last week at a Target store to buy a gift card. The recipient, though, was not a bride or birthday boy; she was the victim of a very public act of domestic violence. The gift card would go to a crime victim for basics: clothes, a toothbrush, whatever she needed.

Like many of Colston's gift card recipients, this 25-year old woma was a crime victim. In mid-August, her toddler daughter and mother were shot to death at the hands of her husband, Kevin Collier, who police said also burned down the family home in El Cajon and shot himself.

As the head of the nearly 30-year-old Crime Victims Fund, Colston is there to make sure that crime victims get, in fast fashion, a few dollars for whatever they immediately need to restore some normalcy.

The dollars she uses come primarily from public donations.

In the first six months of this year, 41 percent of the money paid out by the Crime Victims Fund went to buy food for the victims ---- who, in some cases, were trying to keep their children fed in the wake of domestic violence. About 18 percent of the money the fund paid out went to help victims pay for rent or housing ---- perhaps a motel. And 13 percent of the money used from the fund paid to have the locks on a home changed. "We are a safety net," Colston said. "We fill a void in the system. There is no service for victims or witnesses to crime."

In the first half of the year, the fund made payouts of just over \$7,100. Its income is far too small to meet all the need, though. Earlier this year,

Colston had to swallow hard and turn down requests to pay for five funerals.

Two of the funerals were for teenagers ---- a 16-year-old boy and a 14-year-old girl ---- who were shot to death in an Oceanside park. The other three were for a San Diego mother and her children killed by the mother's ex-boyfriend.

"We don't turn down a request unless it would put us out of business," Colston said.

But small requests can generally be met.

The average victim gets a grant that ranges between \$100 to \$200. In late December, the family of a 7-year-old victim of a drunken driver was given \$125 to pay for food. In March, a domestic violence victim with a child was given \$300 to help replace a window. Still another victim got help paying the costs associated with serving a restraining order.

"The bottom line is that not every criminal gets caught, but there is still a victim," Colston said. "When a crime is committed, it has a ripple effect. It affects not only the victim, but their family. They are affected by violence, and they suffer in silence."

About a third of the people Colston helps are victims of assault. On top of that, nearly a quarter fell victim to domestic violence. And 10 percent were the victims of a drunken driver.

No one can call up the fund's offices and ask for money. All victims must have been referred by an organization. The vast majority of the people Colston's group helps, came to her through a recommendation by the San Diego County District Attorney's Office.

Dan Link, a deputy district attorney and the president of the bar association, said Colston and the fund have been a boon. "The work she has done has been above and beyond for crime victims in San Diego," Link said.

With plans statewide to keep more inmates in county jails rather than sending them to state prisons, California is in the midst of the most significant shift in criminal justice in more than 30 years. With that shift, San Diego County will receive more money to help pay for housing and treating them. Colston joined a number of local agencies jockeying ---- OK,

pleading ---- for a piece of that funding.

Colston said that some of her begging may have worked. Early indications, she said, are that the Crime Victims Fund will get a tiny bit of funding. It's too soon to know how much.

But that isn't really new money. It's more of a replacement for money the Crime Victims Fund will lose when the shift becomes official.

That's because some of the money that came into the fund was from a program that saw inmates from Donovan state prison take part in work crews in South San Diego County. The victims fund got a cut of the contract for those inmates to work outside of the prison.

But that goes away because the low-level, low-risk inmates that made up those crews will no longer be coming to state prisons. Those are the inmates who will now stay in county jails.

So for now and the foreseeable future, the Crime Victims Fund will operate solely through donations.

Colston works in a very small, unadorned office ---- the size of a large walk-in closet ---- within the Family Justice Center in downtown San Diego. She used to work at R.J. Donovan ---- a state prison in Otay Mesa ---- but now works with victims of the sort of men who were behind bars and barbed-wire-topped fences.

"It might be because I used to work in a prison, but when I talk to these people (victims) every day, my heart breaks," she said. Down the hall and around the corner from Colston sits San Diego police Detective Sylvia Vella. She works directly with the sort of victims who turn to Colston's group for financial help.

"The Crime Victims Fund provides hope," Vella said. "When your world is crashing and you realize you married the devil, you find yourself stuck, the fund comes in and repairs windows, doors. Now, there is hope. You can be safe once again." Monetary donations to the Crime Victims Fund can be made through the organization's website.

Other items the fund needs include grocery store gift cards, Target or Walmart gift cards, gas station gift cards and even bus passes. It also looks for in-kind service contracts including hotel/motel room donations, travel vouchers (be it bus, train or plane), window repair and even eyeglasses replacement or repairs.

Call staff writer Teri Figueroa at 760-740-5442.

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