
SENATE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

Senator Steven Bradford, Chair
2021 - 2022 Regular

Bill No: AB 689 **Hearing Date:** June 8, 2021
Author: Petrie-Norris
Version: March 18, 2021
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: KW

Subject: *Comprehensive Statewide Domestic Violence Program*

HISTORY

Source: WEAVE

Prior Legislation: SB 1276 (Rubio), Ch. 249, Stats. 2020
SB 1062 (Bowen), Ch. 639, Stats. 2006
AB 225 (La Follette), Ch.705, Stats. 1985
SB 91 (Presley), Ch.892, Stats. 1977

Support: California Partnership to End Domestic Violence; Human Options; Laura's House

Opposition: None known

Assembly Floor Vote: 75 - 0

PURPOSE

The purpose of this bill is to require the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) to provide financial and technical assistance to local domestic violence centers in implementing 24-hour crisis communication systems that include 24-hour phone services and may also include other communication methods offered on a 24-hour or intermittent basis, such as text messaging or computer chat.

Existing law establishes the Comprehensive Statewide Domestic Violence Program (CSDVP) within Cal OES. (Pen. Code, § 13823.15, subd. (a).)

Existing law states that the goals of the CSDVP are to provide local assistance to existing providers, to maintain and expand services based on the needs of the population, and to establish a directed program for the development of domestic violence services in underserved areas. Requires Cal OES to provide financial and technical assistance to local domestic violence centers implementing all of the following services: 24 hour crisis hotlines, counseling, business centers, emergency safe homes/shelters for victims and families, emergency food and clothing, emergency response to calls from law enforcement, hospital emergency room protocol, emergency transportation, supportive peer counseling, counseling for children, court and social service advocacy, legal assistance with restraining orders, devices, and custody disputes, community resource and referral, and household establishment assistance. Requires that priority for financial and technical assistance be given to emergency shelter programs and safe homes for victims of domestic violence and their children. (Pen. Code § 13823.15, subd. (b).)

Existing law establishes Cal OES and the specified advisory committee to collaboratively administer the Comprehensive Statewide Domestic Violence Program, and requires Cal OES to allocate funds to local centers meeting the criteria for funding. Requires all funded organizations utilize volunteers to the greatest extent possible. States that the centers may seek, receive, and make use of any funds which may be available from all public and private sources to augment state funds received. (Pen. Code, § 13823.15, subd. (c).)

Existing law defines “domestic violence shelter service provider” or “DVSSP” to mean “a victim services provider that operates an established system of services providing safe and confidential emergency housing on a 24-hour basis for victims of domestic violence and their children, including, but not limited to, hotel or motel arrangements, haven, and safe houses.” (Pen. Code, § 13823.15, subd. (f)(15)(B).)

This bill requires Cal OES to provide financial and technical assistance to local domestic violence centers in implementing 24-hour crisis communication systems that must include 24-hour phone services and may also include other communication methods offered on a 24-hour or intermittent basis, such as text messaging, computer chat, or any other technology approved by Cal OES.

COMMENTS

1. Need for This Bill

According to the author:

The Comprehensive Statewide Domestic Violence Program in the Office of Emergency Services provides assistance to Domestic Violence service providers across the state. Existing law requires the office to provide financial and technical assistance to local domestic violence centers in implementing specified services, including 24-hour crisis “hotlines” which have historically been interpreted to be phone lines. Domestic Violence service providers that want to provide other types of crisis response communication services in addition to 24-hour phone lines, such as online chat or text-message based services, are precluded from receiving funding or technical assistance for these additional services under current statute. As a result, CalOES does not collect or evaluate data about these additional communication services, to better understand demand for them and best practices.

This bill modernizes California code to ensure that funding for and reporting about vital crisis communication services offered by Domestic Violence service provider include new text-based technology like computer chat lines and phone texting. By modernizing the requirements to include text-based optional services, Domestic Violence service providers will be better equipped to respond victims of domestic violence who may not feel safe or be able to call a traditional phone-based hotline. Additionally, the state will be better able to track and collect more accurate data about domestic abuse.

2. Modernization of Crisis Communications

In recent year, several domestic violence service providers across the country have launched texting and web chat programs to supplement the phone hotlines which are utilized by victims of domestic violence. (<<https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/escaping-violence/survivors-can->

now-text-for-help>; <<https://www.news-journalonline.com/story/news/2021/01/25/volusia-beacon-center-abused-women-crisis-offers-text-line-daytona-domestic-violence/6602907002/>>; <<https://opdv.ny.gov/>>) Texting and chat programs offer a safe and private way for victims to contact service providers, and some programs are able to translate text.

The proponents of this bill assert that the statute requiring Cal OES to provide technical and financial assistance to local domestic violence centers needs to be updated. Specifically, they contend that the language in the statute referring to “twenty-four-hour crisis hotlines” should be amended to include other communication methods in addition to 24-hour phone hotlines, including text messaging, computer chat, or other technologies approved by Cal OES in order for service providers to receive the financial and technical assistance they currently receive for operating their 24-hour phone hotlines for those other services.

3. Argument in Support

According to Human Options:

Sheltering in place is not always the safest option. With families quarantined and practicing social distancing, victims can become isolated and tensions can rise. We know that in stressful times like this violence in an already unhealthy home is often exacerbated. Victims may not be able to safely reach out to us for help, and so we have to be proactive in providing education and outreach via as many channels as possible. During the first phase of stay-at home orders being lifted, the Crisis Hotline received an influx of calls and our emergency shelter reached capacity within a week.

1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the United States have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner. In a single day in 2019, 81% of California domestic violence shelters served 5,644 adults and children. The Covid-19 Pandemic has caused a dramatic increase in these already alarming rates. The stay-at-home order has forced individuals to stay indoors, meaning in many cases victims are trapped at home with their abusers. Additionally, the stay-at-home order has been associated with alcohol abuse, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms, all which have been linked to increased likelihood of a domestic violence in the home. The Sacramento prosecutor's office has seen a 39% increase in police activity related to domestic violence.

On a typical day before the pandemic, domestic violence hotlines received approximately 13 calls a minute. As a result of the pandemic, the National Domestic Violence Hotline saw a 9% increase of calls, texts and chats—indicating a clear uptick in demand.

By modernizing the requirements to include text-based optional services, Domestic Violence centers will be better equipped to respond reports and help more victims of domestic violence. Additionally, the state will be better able to track and collect more accurate data about domestic abuse.

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