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Community Activists Outraged at Construction Budget

Baton Rouge, La. – After weeks of meetings with legislators, demonstrations at the Capitol and testimony by survivors of domestic violence, community activists were outraged when they saw what was contained in the Governor’s proposed construction budget.

Domestic violence service providers across Louisiana have been scrambling to determine how to survive since sweeping cuts to the programs were unveiled in Governor Jindal’s proposed state operating budget. The proposal for the upcoming fiscal year takes \$2.4 million out of domestic violence services. If the currently proposed cuts go through they will amount to a roughly 38% reduction to domestic violence funding in less than 7 months’ time.

Last week, on April 16th, while community activists and domestic violence advocates were at the legislature testifying to how devastating these cuts would be, Governor Jindal quietly unveiled his capital expenditures for the year. Included among them, a soccer field and fishing pier, total cost \$2.4 million.

Community activists are outraged that lifesaving services would face such devastation all while Governor Jindal proposes recreational spending on a soccer field and fishing pier. “We have been told repeatedly that ‘the money does not exist.’ This is clear evidence that the money exists somewhere. This isn’t a question of money, it’s a question of priorities,” said Lisa Leblanc, Board member of Faith House in Lafayette.

Attorney Rebekah Huggins had strong words about the budget issues, “The prioritization of a soccer field and a fishing pier over women’s lives is outrageous.”

“It is beyond stunning, and must be an oversight, that Governor Jindal is slashing the federally allocated funds from the shelters that protect our state’s families from domestic violence, and is instead allocating the same amount of funding to support the construction of a soccer field and fishing pier. In a period when services to our state’s spouses and children in grave need of protection have been stretched beyond the breaking point, we respectfully beg the governor to reconsider his priorities on this matter,” said John Troutman, member of Keeping Louisiana Families SAFE.

According to the Louisiana Women’s Policy and Research Commission Report to the Governor, which was released just this month, the rate of murder against women in Louisiana is 40% higher than the national average.

Statistics collected by DCFS show that Louisiana domestic violence shelters provided almost 91,000 nights of emergency shelter in the last year and took more than 38,000 crisis calls. Domestic violence programs documented more than 1800 unmet needs during that time period due to low staff and full shelter beds.

Currently there are 35 parishes with points of access to domestic violence services, which will reduce to 20 of 64 parishes under the proposed funding.

Louisiana consistently leads the nation in domestic homicides and has done so since 1997. According to the September 2012 Violence Policy Center report, *When Men Murder Women*, in 2010 Louisiana ranked 4th in the nation in the rate of women killed by men.

Keeping Louisiana Families SAFE is urging all citizens to call and write their legislators and the Governor at 225-342-7015 or PO Box 94004 Baton Rouge, LA 70804 to demand that he protect funding for domestic violence. Additionally, interested citizens are invited to join a rally at 11 a.m. on April 30th at the Capitol to protest various budget cuts.

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Keeping Louisiana Families SAFE is a grassroots organization dedicated to raising awareness of the rate of domestic violence in the state of Louisiana, and to urging state legislators to restore and protect the state budget for domestic violence prevention and intervention programming. SAFE originated in January of 2013 after concerned citizens in Lafayette-- health care workers, social workers, doctors, lawyers, professors, business owners, mothers and fathers, and husbands and wives-- all came together in outrage over the sudden cut in domestic violence funding, which resulted in restrictions of services and personnel in our women's shelters statewide. SAFE members recognize that domestic violence represents a critical public health and economic concern, and believe that funding to provide safety, health care, advocacy and empowerment for survivors is, moreover, a pressing ethical concern.