

For Immediate Release

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Survivor/Artist served by Rape Victim Advocates, Executive Director participate in press conference on Impact of Illinois State Budget Crisis

Chicago, IL, (January 25, 2016) Sharmili Majmudar, Executive Director of Rape Victim Advocates (RVA) in Chicago, IL, spoke at a press conference today regarding the impact of the Illinois state budget crisis on rape crisis services. She was joined by Martha Alicia Montes Madrid, a survivor and artist assisted by RVA. The press conference was hosted by Representative Greg Harris, and included Representative Lou Lang, Representative LaShawn Ford and Representative Mary Flowers. Various representatives of rape crisis services, home-based senior services, pediatric HIV/AIDS prevention services, youth homeless services, and leaking fuel tank remediation companies shared the devastating impact the budget crisis has had on their clients, services and employees.

“1 out of every 7 women in Illinois will be raped in her lifetime. The over \$6.5 million dollars that support rape crisis services across the state are being held hostage in this crisis. But ultimately, it’s the victims of sexual violence we serve every day who are truly being held hostage in this battle,” shared Sharmili Majmudar. “I am sincerely frightened about the devastating, long-term impact this crisis will have. There is nothing surgical or precise about the impact - this crisis has torn apart the fabric of Illinois safety net. For too many, the damage has already been done.” (full statement attached)

Martha Alicia Montes Madrid spoke movingly about the life-saving impact of RVA’s counseling services, saying, “If the Rape Crisis Centers like RVA are forced to close, it will be a huge mistake. I don't think I would be here today if weren't for a rape crisis center like RVA. Because of RVA, the thought of giving up, suicide, is gone. I am having a second chance in life, I have dreams. I love being alive.” (full statement attached)

Majmudar and Madrid echoed the call by all of the participating agencies in asking the leaders in Springfield – particularly Governor Rauner and Speaker Madigan – to urgently negotiate an end to the budget crisis. Until this fiscal year, RVA received close to \$250,000 annually from the state in support of comprehensive rape crisis services; the state budget crisis is forcing the organization to consider cutting programs and services. Currently, RVA has been able to weather the crisis through cost cutting and drawing down on reserves. RVA is one of 29 rape crisis centers that are members of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

Rape Victim Advocates (RVA) is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the healing and empowerment of sexual assault survivors through non-judgmental crisis intervention counseling, individual and group counseling and medical and legal advocacy in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. RVA provides public education and institutional advocacy in order to improve the treatment of sexual assault survivors and to effect positive change in policies and public. RVA envisions a world where prevention efforts and global awareness of sexual violence expose rape myths, remove stigmas, eliminate rape and support all people as equal members of society. In 2014, RVA celebrated 40 years of supporting survivors and working to build a society intolerant of sexual violence.

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Statement read by Sharmili Majmudar, Executive Director

Good afternoon. I'm Sharmili Majmudar, Executive Director of Rape Victim Advocates, serving the city of Chicago. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share the impact of the state budget crisis with you.

Rape Victim Advocates (RVA) is a comprehensive rape crisis center providing services 24-hours a day, 365 days a year. Our range of services includes 24-hour crisis response to 14 hospitals across Chicago, legal and medical advocacy, counseling, support groups, child sexual abuse prevention, youth violence prevention, community awareness, public education, policy development, university-based sexual assault prevention and training for thousands of law enforcement, prosecutors, educators, social workers and other professionals. Last year, we provided direct services to 1600 survivors of sexual violence and their loved ones – of those, 600 were seen in hospital emergency rooms.

This year, with the current budget crisis, we saw our waiting list for counseling services rise up to an unprecedented 100. That's one hundred survivors of sexual violence being asked to wait for months for the support to help them heal from an incredible trauma. That is one hundred victims who had the courage to reach out for help only to be told they couldn't be seen – not today, not tomorrow, not even next month. And the longer this budget crisis continues, the higher the likelihood that the bravery of victims will have to be met with our counselors, often through their own silent tears, say "I'm sorry." Those survivors deserve to be supported in their healing and quest for justice.

And it's not just the survivors themselves – our communities benefit from the services of rape crisis centers. We help elementary schools fulfill their requirements under the law to provide child sexual abuse prevention. We help universities design their sexual assault response. We train police officers on how to work with victims. We make sure survivors know their rights, including not losing their jobs just because they had to miss work due to a sexual assault. We are there when a rape victim undergoes a medical rape kit.

Our funding is a combination of public and private dollars. We fundraise year-round. But private dollars cannot fill the enormous gap created by the inaction of the public servants elected to leadership. And private dollars cannot fill the moral gap created by that inaction either.

1 out of every 7 women in Illinois will be raped in her lifetime. The over \$6.5 million dollars that support rape crisis services across the state are being held hostage in this crisis. But ultimately, it's the victims of sexual violence we serve every day who are truly being held hostage in this battle. These victims don't just rely on us, they rely on the many services for the vulnerable being affected by this situation – immigration services, child care assistance, shelter, the list goes on and on and on. I am sincerely frightened about the devastating, long-term impact this crisis will have. There is nothing surgical or precise about the impact - this crisis has torn apart the fabric of Illinois safety net. For too many, the damage has already been done.

I implore you, for the health of our communities and as a demonstration of true leadership: Pass a budget that equitably funds human services.

Statement read by Martha Alicia Montes Madrid, survivor and artist

My name is Martha Alicia Montes Madrid. For me, RVA has provided a life-changing experience.

I remember one time I saw a mural on the street that read, “Before I die I want to _____.” You were asked to write the end of the phrase and I wrote-“Before I die I want to LIVE.”

RVA helped me find meaning in life. RVA helped me to believe in myself. And RVA helped me start living.

I am a survivor of rape.

Abused when I was a child and when I became an adult.

I was blamed and shamed for what I went through.

They made me feel guilty and unworthy to be loved.

Before I came to RVA, I had experienced an abusive relationship with a therapist, the person who was supposed to help me heal from years of sexual, physical, emotional and verbal abuse I received from my family. But, instead, this therapist abused me for four years. It was a horrifying experience and I almost lost my faith. I trusted my therapist to help me work through the abuse by my family and not become another abuser in my life. But that’s what happened.

And then a friend told me about RVA

I saw this place like the last chance, this time, with the added trauma of being so scared of therapists. I remember thinking: “if this therapy doesn't work, I am done, I am giving up”...I was feeling hopeless.

I was so scared the first time I met with my RVA counselor. My friend told me that this counselor was amazing, but based on my past experience I still felt frightened about seeing her.

In my heart I hoped that this new counselor could offer me what no one else had been able to do – help me to start LIVING.

I received an amazing gift from RVA – they believed my story and they believed in ME. I felt respected, I felt worthy – for the first time in my life.

I can’t thank my counselor and RVA enough for their support.

Thanks to RVA, I have blossomed as a woman and as an artist.

I am now very busy working on my art, participating in workshops and exhibiting my work. Two of my pieces were exhibited at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) and two pieces are currently on display at The Awakenings Gallery in Ravenswood.

My dream of selling my art has come true and I keep on dreaming.

But even now, the truth is that recovering from sexual abuse is ongoing work. I continue to participate in services like the art therapy support group. I continue to need RVA. And I am just one of almost 1600 survivors that RVA helped just last year.

If the Rape Crisis Centers like RVA are forced to close, it will be a huge mistake. I don't think I would be here today if it weren't for a rape crisis center like RVA. Because of RVA, the thought of giving up, suicide, is gone. I am having a second chance in life, I have dreams. I love being alive.

I ask our elected leaders: Don't leave us without people who believe us. Without a place to heal. Without hope. Please save rape crisis services.

Thank you.