

Federal grant nixed for Springfield violence intervention program for women

Updated: Aug. 16, 2025, 6:08 a.m. | Published: Aug. 16, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



Breasia Mitchell reads a letter that she wrote on the importance of a Roca program for high-risk young mothers and women at her graduation ceremony Wednesday. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)Douglas Hook

By [Greta Jochem](#) | gjochem@repub.com

SPRINGFIELD — About four years ago, Breasia Mitchell was living at a women's shelter in Holyoke. She had been in an abusive relationship for years, and shelter staff there referred her to a violence intervention program for young women and mothers at Roca.

The nonprofit agency addresses urban violence by working with victims and perpetrators across locations in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Baltimore, Maryland.

Mitchell, now 24, didn't go at first.

"Honestly, I didn't think anyone could help me," Mitchell said on Wednesday. She didn't trust many people.

But staff at the Roca program kept reaching out to Mitchell, and so she got involved, although tepidly at first.

Then in 2023, the father of her oldest child broke her jaw, she said. Roca staff visited her in the hospital, helped her get an apartment and supported her through court proceedings, she said.

"Slowly, I started feeling like maybe I wasn't completely alone," she said. "Roca became the only safe place I had." On Wednesday, Mitchell graduated from the multiyear women's program in Springfield.

"Because of Roca, I'm still here," she told a room of fellow graduates. "For the first time in a long time, I have a future."

Reduced capacity with grant loss

Though Mitchell credits the program with changing her life trajectory, Roca has less capacity to help young women like her, because the U.S. Department of Justice this spring terminated a grant that brought in about \$1 million to the women's program in Western Massachusetts.



Tatiana Rammos, right, and her friend Janelis Cartagena graduate from a multiyear ROCA program for high-risk young mothers and women on Wednesday. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)Douglas Hook

Sunindiya Bhalla, Roca’s executive vice president of Women and 2Gen, said that the agency will live on, even with the reduced funding.

“While disappointing, one thing we’re committed to is making sure Roca is still here in the future,” said Bhalla. “We may look a little different, but we’re not going to compromise on what we’re able to do, even if it’s with lesser capacity.”

Awarded late last year, the three-year grant was funded through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, a law passed in 2022 that aims to address gun violence.

The \$2 million award was split between Roca’s program in Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield to help young women aged 14 to 24 “who are the most likely to shoot or be shot,” the award letter says.

But in April, the DOJ cut more than 350 grants, totaling \$800 million, according to an [analysis by Reuters](#). The DOJ cut more than half of all its grants to gun violence prevention programs, another [Reuters report found](#).

In Springfield, the women’s program “no longer effectuates the program goals or agency priorities,” says the DOJ’s grant cancellation letter.

The federal department's new priorities include: "more directly supporting certain law enforcement operations, combating violent crime, protecting American children, and supporting American victims of trafficking and sexual assault, and better coordinating law enforcement efforts at all levels of government," the letter said.

"These are all things we do relentlessly," said Dwight Robson, executive vice president of operations at Roca. "To be candid, it's frustrating."

Lost funding hurts Springfield more than other Roca-aided cities, Robson said. "It's more difficult to raise private money in Springfield or Holyoke than it is in Boston or Baltimore," he said.



At the ROCA center in Springfield, 25 high-risk young mothers and women graduate from a multiyear intervention program on Wednesday. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)Douglas Hook

The Department of Justice did not immediately respond to a request from The Republican for further explanation on why it terminated the grant.

There are very few community intervention violence programs in the country focused on women, Bhalla said.

"This, to our knowledge, was the only grant that DOJ gave out in this initiative, in this bucket, that was exclusively focused on women," she said.

It wasn't the only DOJ grant allocated to Roca for community violence intervention programs that was recently clawed back.

Two three-year grants to Roca programs in Boston and Baltimore also were canceled. Together, they had about \$2 million in unspent funds terminated, Robson said.

In Boston, Roca's community violence response project was partway through its grant to, as the award letter said, help more than 200 young people who are at risk of shooting someone or being shot, to help them change their behavior and disengage from violence.

"Community violence intervention programs are essential to preventing gun violence," Ruth Zakarin, CEO of the Massachusetts Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence, said in a statement.

"Any disruption in funding will have a significant impact on these critically important programs and make our communities less safe," Zakarin said. "With the current administration making these funding cuts, particularly cuts of this size, I worry that we will see an increase in violence over the coming years."

The organization submitted an administrative appeal, and while the DOJ acknowledged it, it's not clear what the process entails, Robson said.

As part of its appeal to the federal government, Hampden District Attorney Anthony Gulluni wrote a letter of support, asking the DOJ to reconsider its decision.

"Roca has been an invaluable ally in our collective mission to address the complex challenges faced by young women who are victims of violence, including human trafficking and gun violence," Gulluni wrote.

There's also a federal class action lawsuit over the terminated funds from the DOJ's Office of Justice Programs, but Robson said Roca opted not to be a named plaintiff.

"Defendants' rescinding of these awards is shameful," U.S. District Judge Amit P. Mehta wrote last month in a [memo](#). "It is likely to harm communities and individuals vulnerable to crime and violence. No federal agency, especially the Department of Justice, should conduct itself in such (a) manner."

But, that isn't enough, Mehta said. He dismissed the case because the court didn't have jurisdiction, and the plaintiffs didn't show a constitutional rights violation. The plaintiffs, led by the [Vera Institute for Justice](#), have appealed.

A Roca program for women in Massachusetts, partnering with the Office of the Child Advocate, did receive \$1.25 million in the state's budget, support Robson said is vital. That was slightly less money than the program received from the state in the previous year.

The last year has been a challenge with the grant cut, and also because one Springfield woman in the program was killed. Jessiah Mercado, 20, and her 4-month-old son, Messiah Diaz, were killed in November in a shooting in Hartford. She had been in the program for a few years, and it's possible she would have graduated with the group on Wednesday, Bhalla said.

"We remember Jessiah for her fierce love for her son, her ongoing training, determination and the encouragement she gave others at Roca," Bhalla told the women at their graduation.

A look inside the program

Early this year, Roca's Springfield women's program was ready to expand, thanks to the federal DOJ grant. It was serving 100 women a year, and there's always more demand, especially in Western Massachusetts, Bhalla said. There's a waitlist of about 20 people right now, she said.

"What we're seeing is more and more referrals are coming through, probation for young women who have gun charges or trafficking victims," Bhalla said. "And we really want to be able to support our capacity. But, unfortunately, we were poised for growth, and then that got pulled back with the pullback of the federal funds."



Roca Executive Vice President of Women and 2Gen at ROCA Sunindiya Bhalla speaks to the graduates of a multiyear violence intervention program for high-risk young mothers and women on Wednesday. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)Douglas Hook

The program, which already had a small staff, had to cut three full-time jobs, Bhalla said. It had to reduce the program size, too. "We're going to see what we can do this year, but right now we're capped at 80," Bhalla said.

Funding was planned for direct service work and a community needs assessment to look at what violence among women looks like and what's driving it, Bhalla said.

Roca gets referrals to the program through places like the Department of Children and Families and the criminal justice system, Bhalla said.

"Roca is often seen as a last resort. It's someone who hasn't succeeded in other programs, has involvement with systems, and isn't really kind of showing up and doing what they need to do, largely because they're either mistrusting and fearful, or they just don't have the ability to be able to navigate requirements."

About half of the women involved in Roca in the last year had some involvement with the criminal justice system, and a quarter of whom were victims of sex trafficking. The majority of women were young mothers, many of whom have involvement in their lives with the DCF.

In Roca's men's programs, it's most often the case the participants were perpetrators of violence, Bhalla said. Some women also have been perpetrators, but most often they are victims, she said.

At the start, Roca reaches out repeatedly, like staff did with Mitchell, the recent program graduate.

"If we get a referral, they can slam the door in our face, but we literally physically go and do outreach until they're willing to kind of open the door, literally (and) figuratively," Bhalla said.

The Roca program offers resources such as parenting classes, workforce readiness, education support and help connecting to benefits they might not be accessing.

It also focuses on cognitive behavioral therapy. "We're working with young people who have experienced a lot of trauma," Bhalla said. "Adolescence being a critical window of brain development, they haven't really had the supports to cultivate strong cognitive, behavioral and emotional regulation skills."

The therapeutic program helps with that. "We really want to help people build the skills they need to be able to slow down, regulate their emotions and behaviors," Bhalla said.

To graduate, like 25 women did on Wednesday, participants need to finish the core programming, achieve some level economic and housing stability, hold a job, and have no involvement with the criminal justice system or DCF, Bhalla said.

Mitchell, one of the graduates, said the therapy program helped her. “I was a wild one. But I think it all made me calmer,” she said.

The transitional employment program was also beneficial. She worked at a day care center, but after she was hospitalized in a domestic violence incident, she stopped working.

“(Roca staff) kind of pushed me to work here, to get myself back into getting up every day for a reason to go do something. ... I stayed in my house for almost two years,” she said.

In the fall, Mitchell is starting at Springfield Technical Community College to study criminal justice and has dreams to eventually become a lawyer.



Yvonne graduates from a multiyear ROCA intervention program for high-risk young mothers and women on Wednesday. Her last name is withheld to help protect her identity. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)Douglas Hook

The program was also life-changing for Yvonne, a 25-year-old Springfield woman who didn’t want to use her last name to protect her privacy. She is a single mom for her three kids, ages 5, 3 and almost 2.

Yvonne came to the program almost five years ago when a women’s shelter recommended it to her. The father of her youngest child abused her, she said.

“He almost killed me when I was pregnant with her,” she said. “I almost lost her.” She didn’t have anyone to turn to for help.



At the ROCA center in Springfield, 25 high-risk young mothers and women graduate from a multiyear intervention program Wednesday. (Douglas Hook / The Republican)Douglas Hook

Workers at Roca checked on her often, and it was helpful for her to have an outlet to talk about what was going on. She found the therapeutic programs helpful.

"I've been through a lot," Yvonne said. "I'm really proud of the person I am, the mom I am."