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'Beeper Judge' Program Successful Helping Domestic Violence Victims

By Brian Hamlin, The Reporter, Senior Staff Writer

Seventeen years ago, Solano County courts were facing a complex logistical problem. The state was mandating that local judges take action to launch a 24-hour domestic violence response program. The county was more than willing to cooperate, but there were only a half-dozen judges to coordinate the comprehensive, countywide effort.

The program required that a judge be available 24 hours a day, every day to issue emergency protective orders whenever requested by a victim of domestic violence.

"They really didn't know how they were going to have the judges available 24 hours a day and still conduct court," explained family law attorney Deanna Myhre, the woman who came up with a surprisingly simple solution to what appeared to be a complicated problem.

The solution, generally known as the "beeper judge" program, involved issuance of electronic pagers to specially appointed attorneys who would volunteer their spare time – nights, weekends and holidays – to answer the call whenever an emergency restraining order was needed to give combative couples a little safe space.

There were some skeptics, Myhre said, but overall there was a positive response from county attorneys.

The first year, there were only about 30 requests for emergency restraining orders from the fledgling band of pro tem judge attorneys.

Last year, there were 17 attorneys participating and more than 400 protective order calls were handled by the volunteers on nights, weekends and holidays.

Myhre – who recently stepped down as a back-up attorney in the program – attributes the continued success of the "beeper judge" program to its basic simplicity and cost-effectiveness.

"It was just so simple," said Myhre, who recently was given a special service award by the Solano County Bar Association for her work in the program. "We'd pass a calendar around at bar association meetings and attorneys would volunteer to carry the beeper. Police would have the beeper number and could call it whenever a domestic violence victim thought he or she needed a protective order."

The process, she explained, is all done over the phone. The “beeper judge” doesn’t have to go to the scene and the victim doesn’t have to wait to make a court appearance.

“It was simple then and it’s still simple to this day,” Myhre said. “It’s a one-shot call, essentially a cooling-off order.”

The emergency restraining order, Myhre added, is a good short-term tool to keep domestic partners from clashing, but it’s not necessarily a guaranteed solution for every domestic violence situation.

“It seems to work in most instances, but I’m not going to say that it’s going to protect you in every instance if you’ve got someone crazy enough, determined enough, to do you harm,” she explained.

As for cost-effectiveness, the key word is “volunteer.” There are no billable hours involved for the attorneys who sign up to respond whenever a domestic violence emergency requires immediate attention.

While sitting Superior Court judges handle emergency protective orders during weekday working hours, it’s the “beeper judges” who take the calls at 3 a.m. and in the middle of their Fourth of July barbecues.

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