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A Welcome Safehouse for Latinas

By Cindy Rodriguez Denver Post Staff Columnist

The name may raise eyebrows: the Latina Safehouse Initiative.

It's the brainchild of a group of volunteers who say battered Latinas need a shelter of their own. They are raising money and hope to open the non-profit shelter sometime next year.

But the name and its implied exclusivity raise the question: Why segregate? Others may wonder: How would people react to a Caucasian Safehouse Initiative?

Those seem like valid questions until you talk to Latinas who have been slammed into walls and pummeled by their husbands.

These women are often filled with so much fear they don't know whom to trust. Add to that the complications of not being fluent in English and coming from a culture that tells women to forgive their husbands, and it becomes clear why these women need a different approach.

Besides, area shelters are at capacity, and sometimes women are turned away, according to Ana Soler, director of the Victim Services Network, 51 agencies in the state that offer help to people who have been abused.

Soler is one of 10 volunteers working to establish the safe house.

Another is Millie Durán, whose recent master's dissertation was a feasibility study on the need for a shelter for battered Latinas.

Durán found there have been times when Latina immigrants were turned away because there were no Spanish speakers who could understand them.

Those two women, along with six other Latinas and two Latinos, form the advisory committee that's been researching for several months ways to create the Latina Safehouse. They are working on grant proposals, but so far they only have about \$3,000.

They hope to get a boost from a July 29 fundraiser at the Denver Botanic Gardens featuring guest speaker Josefina López, co-author of the Sundance-award winning movie "Real Women Have Curves."

Tickets for the event, called Latinas Honoring Latinas, are \$50 and include a day pass to the gardens and a buffet meal. Between ticket sales and a live auction, the Initiative advisory committee hopes to raise \$25,000.

Another honoree is Renissa Rowena, a 22-year-old immigrant from Guyana, an English-speaking country in South America, who said she grew up being physically and sexually abused by her father.

She is now interning at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (headquartered in Denver) and plans to dedicate her life to the cause.

It doesn't matter that Rowena is of East Indian descent, as is half the population of Guyana. She exemplifies a spirit the organization celebrates.

Rowena said being abused "destroyed a part of me that I can't get back." She said little things – footsteps behind her, a sudden noise – make her heart race. "There is that constant fear of being abused again," she said. But having gotten away from her abusive father, she knows she can teach other victims from her experience. "I want people to know they can survive it."

Of course it helps if the women have a place to go.

It might take more than a year to get the Latina Safehouse established. The first step is to conduct a series of focus groups in low-income neighborhoods, because studies show domestic abuse is five times more prevalent in families living below the poverty level, said volunteer Benita Muñiz, who works as a Community Justice Advocate in the Denver District Attorney's office.

They want potential clients to have a say in what kind of shelter they'd create and where it should be located.

Come winter, volunteers will try to rent or build shelter space. It seems a long way off, but a year isn't so long to wait considering Latinas in Denver never have had a safe place of their own.

Cindy Rodríguez's column appears Tuesdays and Thursdays in Scene. Contact her at 303-820-1211 or crodriguez@denverpost.com.

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