

Orlando Sentinel (Florida)

May 14, 2007 Monday

Abused Women have Friends in Court

By Sarah Lundy, Sentinel Staff Writer

Ann Lickteig has her eye on everyone in court.

She watches the judge. She watches the prosecutor. She watches the defense attorney.

Because of what happened to her in a courtroom four years ago, Lickteig is there to watch out for victims of domestic violence.

After a boyfriend she accused of beating her was found not guilty in 2003, the 63-year-old Heathrow woman decided that someone needed to oversee the court process on behalf of battered women.

Now, nearly a dozen volunteers, identified by their CourtWatch badges, spend hours in Orange County courtrooms, taking notes during domestic-violence cases to ensure the justice system works. It is the first program of its kind in Central Florida.

And judges and attorneys welcome the input. During the past year, court officials have tried to ease victims' experiences when dealing with the legal system. CourtWatch, advocates say, is a natural next step.

"We want to make sure the court holds the perpetrator accountable and doesn't revictimize the victim," said Laura Williams, 46, the program's coordinator, who met Lickteig about a year ago and worked to expand the program.

Williams has a personal interest in making sure justice is served for victims of domestic violence: Her estranged husband fatally shot their 2-year-old daughter before killing himself in 1996.

Orange County domestic-violence-related deaths are on a pace to far surpass last year's total of at least 10. Last week, five people – including a scorned ex-boyfriend who fatally shot a 22-year-old woman and friend before killing himself – died as a result of domestic violence.

"It just makes you more determined to continue doing this," Williams said.

On a recent day, volunteer Mary Dipboye, a retired Houston transportation consultant who says her only court experience is watching Law & Order, followed Williams and Lickteig into courtroom 4B at the Orange County Courthouse. They observed the prosecutor and defense attorney question a woman whose boyfriend grabbed her arm during an argument at a mall Dec. 23.

A few minutes later, Dipboye and Williams headed to the 16th floor, where Orange Circuit Court Judge Janet Thorpe was presiding over restraining-order hearings. One man asked the judge for a protective order against his wife. But the woman contended that her husband was the real abuser in the relationship. The judge denied the request after learning the man had e-mailed his wife days earlier, pleading with her to reconcile.

“Improving justice appeals to me,” Dipboye, 59, said of why she took the three-hour volunteer training and joined the group.

Lickteig and Williams say they have big plans for CourtWatch. Williams developed forms – with sections about the judge, prosecutor and defense attorney – that volunteers fill out in each case they observe. The questions include: Did the judge show respect to the victim? Did the victim meet with a prosecutor prior to the hearing? Was the defense attorney prepared?

“I like them in the courtroom,” said Assistant State Attorney Michelle Latham, who heads the domestic-violence unit. “We should be accountable for our cases.”

Orange Circuit Court Judge Alice Blackwell White agreed.

“They’ll have credibility and props from me because they spend the time to sit there and watch what’s going on,” she said.

If CourtWatch spots trends, such as a judge who repeatedly does not pay attention or a prosecutor who appears unprepared, the volunteers will send letters to those involved.

So far, the volunteers have been pleased.

At the end of the year, a report with recommendations will be prepared for court officials and prosecutors. That way, CourtWatch will have its own statistics to back up requests for change.

“The criminal-justice system is where people think they are going to get some kind of help,” said Carol Wick, the chief executive officer of Harbor House, which operates Orange County’s domestic-violence shelter. “Victims can’t have too many advocates.”

CONTACT: Sarah Lundy can be reached at 407-420-6218 or slundy@orlandosentinel.com.

Copyright © 2007 Sentinel Communications Co.