

SEATTLE TIMES

July 24, 2004, Saturday

Abuse Victims Get Chance for Private Shelter

***Traditional model not always be the best method, officials say
new domestic-violence programs offer women personal space.***

By Leslie Fulbright, *Seattle Times* Eastside bureau

Domestic-violence programs that privately house abuse victims are starting to pop up locally, after years of complaints by women about the traditional and crowded communal shelters.

Personal space seems to be an issue for many women, and some advocates worry that unless they start finding alternatives, victims may return to violent situations.

“The traditional shelter model is no longer working,” said Linda Olsen, executive director of the Eastside Domestic Violence Program (EDVP). “The concept of getting people together is great, but sharing a house with eight other families in crisis can be tough.”

The EDVP recently closed its shelter and leased 12 apartments where women and their children can live for up to three months. The units are spread throughout a large complex.

A domestic-violence agency in Portland closed its shelter after 77 years and now gives battered women motel vouchers and money so they can get their own apartments.

“The one-size-fits-all model wasn’t working for everyone,” said Kris Billhardt, director of the Volunteers of America program in Oregon. “We had folks leaving because they didn’t like the rules.”

Among such rules: Don’t tell anyone where you are. No drinking. Do your chores. No burning incense.

“Women have said it is as bad as a controlling and abusive relationship,” Billhardt said. “In addition to the strict rules, there was someone always wanting to know their business. It was causing some women to go back to their batterers.”

The programs used feedback from surveys to discover what was working. The programs learned the shelter especially was tough for women with big families, language barriers or cultures that forbid sharing personal matters with strangers.

“We found that a private room gives them a temporary and comfortable refuge,” Billhardt said.

EDVP and the Portland program are devoting their resources to the new model and believe they are picking up a lot of women who would have slipped through the system. In addition, the programs can help more people.

The private-living programs are more cost-effective because they don’t require round-the-clock staffing, a huge cost at a residential facility.

In the eight months since the Portland program started, it has given vouchers to 169 households, far more than the shelter could have handled. And some money is going for assistance with rent, food and utility bills.

The EDVP used state money for a test run with two apartments and got a positive response.

“The women appreciated the privacy, the freedom to practice religious beliefs and the independent living,” said Olsen, the executive director. “They no longer felt like they were under a microscope or being criticized.”

The agency recently received a \$20,000 grant from the Group Health Community Foundation to expand.

Olsen said the new strategy will result in a 40 percent increase in capacity, a big boost for a program that turns away nine people for every one it takes. Advocates try to discern danger levels and take whoever is at greatest risk, but it basically is first come, first served.

Women who leave their batterers are at a 75 percent greater risk of being killed than those who stay, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

“We get so many hotline calls requesting safety possibilities and shelter options,” Olsen said.

It’s not to say the shelters don’t work for anyone. Some women need constant supervision when they are in the vulnerable stage, advocates said. They want someone to talk to and to turn to for help.

But other advocates said living in a big house with a bunch of people is too stressful.

“I hear these complaints from programs whose clients don’t have enough space,” said Terri Kimball, executive director at Domestic Abuse Women’s Network, a local group. “We have separate bedrooms for each family and places where people can get away from each other.”

Kimball said the shelter model should not be given a bad rap.

“Living communally, you get a lot of support and knowledge from other clients,” she said. “You are not isolated, and that is really important.”

Most advocates agreed the best way to help victims is to provide them with choices. A successful New York program has three options: a communal shelter, host families and private dwellings.

“After the hotline call comes in, the case worker and program director determine case-by-case who should go where,” said Danielle Emanuel-Moore, a spokeswoman for Safe Horizon, based in New York City. “It depends on mental capacity, how much danger they are in and how big their family is.”

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