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Domestic Violence Victims Get Attention: Experts Sound Off at Conference

By Polly Summar *Journal Staff Writer*

There were no one-size-fits-all answers at a domestic violence conference Saturday, sponsored by New Mexico first lady Barbara Richardson's Domestic Violence Advisory Board.

"You need to fit the program to the community," Richardson said at the all-day event held at the University of New Mexico College of Nursing. "It's not one-stop shopping."

But experts representing "best practices" from around the country seemed to agree that focusing on protecting the victim keeps everyone on the same track.

"If you report your abuse, your child might be taken away from you," said Graham Barnes, team leader for the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minn. "Not because of anything you did," but because of violence directed against the mother, considered dangerous to the child.

In such cases, Barnes explained, "bringing the criminal justice system into people's lives can actually make things worse."

Deborah Tucker, executive director of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, based in Austin, Texas, said, "We have had a tendency to focus on the criminal justice system as our primary partner."

Tucker said domestic violence advocates need to look to areas like faith communities and corporate leaders for creating changes that can more directly help victims.

"I firmly believe that violence against women happens because we tolerate it," Tucker said.

Casey Gwinn, city attorney for San Diego, followed up on that thought by adding that society does not tolerate bank robbers. They're immediately put in jail, he said, and he asked why the same is not done with abusers.

"You cannot protect children if you do not protect their mothers," he said.

Gwinn founded San Diego's Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Unit in the late '80s, which was recognized as the nation's model domestic violence prosecution unit by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

"When I hear that you have a 75 percent dismissal rate of filed criminal cases in some communities (in New Mexico), then you're broken," Gwinn said of the judicial system.

And Gwinn told the audience: "Misdemeanors is where you win the battle, not felonies," explaining that misdemeanors lead to felonies.

Speaker Ada Pecos Melton of Jemez Pueblo, president of American Indian Development Associates, which addresses Indian crime, violence and victimization issues, talked about the issues that the mainstream court system faces when dealing with Native American victims.

"Our justice system did not come from England," said Melton, referring to tribal court systems. "Our system is based on love and caring of the offender, the victim, the family.

"People think they need to bring 'models' to us."

She urged the audience to "find someone in the Indian community who can be your cultural adviser, so you don't have to learn 500 years of culture."

Richardson said the advisory board convened the conference as one of the final steps in its research.

"We've been meeting since October, by executive order out of the 2003 Legislature," Richardson said.

She said the board plans to have its recommendations completed by the end of June.

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