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## **Beauty Salons Take on Domestic Abuse**

By Cristian Salazar, Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK -- At the Divas beauty salon, Spanish-language talk shows play on the TV, blow driers and scissors are at the ready and customers chat about everything from men to money to jobs.

But for a few weeks recently, the women who work at the salon in the Washington Heights area of upper Manhattan gathered in the back to learn about domestic violence.

They had volunteered to be part of a program that hopes to build on the trust between salon workers and their clients to identify cases of domestic abuse, especially in the Latino community. It is part of a growing national effort based on the idea that salons and hair stylists can sometimes be the first line of defense against domestic abuse.

Women feel safe at salons, explained Ana Gonzalez, the 24-year-old manager of Divas. "They know they can say anything they want," she said.

The three-year pilot project at Divas was created by Ingrid Dominguez, director of a city-funded family services agency in the Washington Heights and Central Harlem neighborhoods. She said she came up with the idea after observing a woman at a salon tell a stylist about an abusive relationship.

Dominguez said she thought that if her agency could train salon workers in domestic violence awareness, her counselors could reach cases that may not otherwise get referred to them.

Elsewhere, Cut It Out, a nonprofit based in Birmingham, Ala., was created in 2000 to use salons to refer female clients to domestic abuse prevention resources, and it has expanded to 50 states, according to its founder. It distributes training kits and other materials to a network of enrolled salons.

The program started by Dominguez focuses on salons scattered across Washington Heights. Five salons have so far gone through the training and more are being recruited. Both men and women are involved in the program.

While city officials have said that major crimes involving domestic abuse have decreased significantly, there has been growing concern about the problem in the Latino community.

Women in the Washington Heights neighborhood still don wedding dresses and march through the streets in honor of Gladys Ricart, killed on her wedding day in 1999 by her ex-lover, a prominent local Dominican businessman. His trial revealed his abusive tendencies that had been ignored because of his prominence.

“It has brought some awareness that it is going on,” Dominguez said of Ricart’s death. “It is right there, but people just turn their heads.”

While domestic violence remains a concern in Latino neighborhoods like Washington Heights, for the city as a whole there are encouraging signs in recent crime statistics.

During the last four years, the city says, there has been a 21 percent decrease in domestic violence felony crimes such as homicides. Eight percent of murders committed in 2007 were attributed to domestic violence, down from 12 percent the previous year, police said.

The mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence did not have statistics immediately available for just the Latino community, but advocates say that it appears to be a growing problem.

“Maybe they don’t have any data specific to the community or the population, but in terms to us, we have noticed an increase in the need for services,” Dominguez said.

The workers at the Divas salon did not seem to need much training on what constitutes domestic violence.

During their first training session, one worker recalled that a friend’s husband had come home one day carrying a gun, saying it was for his wife. Another said she once arrived at her apartment building and found that a neighbor had stabbed his wife nearly to death.

Domestic violence is a daily concern in the Latino community, said barber Rafael Cruz, one of a handful of male salon workers in the program at another salon, Elky’s.

Cruz, 38, said in Spanish that his male clients often tell him about their marital problems, and he tells them the only solution is to talk.

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