

Women's eNews

September 16, 2005

New Centers Offer Battered Women Dozens of Services

By Rebecca Vesely, WeNews Correspondent

Latarya Coleman is just one of many women who has survived domestic violence only to face a bureaucratic maze of social services. Now, a federal pilot project is attempting to streamline the process by funding new "family justice centers."

OAKLAND, Calif. (WOMENSENEWS) – Latarya Coleman’s estranged husband shot her in the head just above her right eye in 2001. He then turned the gun on himself and committed suicide. Coleman was paralyzed on her left side but survived the shooting. Her two sons, who were 4 and 5 years old at the time, survived too.

But the family was traumatized.

“I didn’t think I had a problem,” Coleman says now. “But there were mentally things that were bothering me. I tried not to think about it and I thought, ‘I’m alive by the grace of God.’”

Meanwhile, her sons, Kenneth and Keon, were acting out in school and withdrawing from their mother.

The family had moved from Louisiana, where the shooting happened, to Hayward, Calif., near Oakland, in Alameda County.

Two years ago, they got help from Children’s Hospital Oakland’s DOVES Project, which stands for Domestic Violence Education and Screening. The Colemans received counseling and art therapy through the program for more than a year.

Finding this and other services wasn’t easy, though. In fact, Coleman only found it by chance when she went to the hospital to seek help with housing.

“This family stumbled into services,” said Shelley Hamilton, the Colemans’ counselor at DOVES as well as the group’s management coordinator. “It was an accidental find and it’s very plausible this family would have fallen into the cracks.”

Under One Roof

Advocates for domestic violence survivors hope that DOVES can limit the number of families who fall through the cracks by moving dozens of services in the county, including DOVES, under one roof.

That roof is the Family Justice Center in Oakland, which opened in late August as part of a federal pilot project announced in 2003 by President Bush.

The U.S. Justice Department provided \$20 million to fund 15 so-called family justice centers nationwide, at about \$1.3 million each, in an attempt to connect victims of violence with a maze of services more quickly and efficiently.

The first center opened in Brooklyn, N.Y., in July and others will open across the country during the next year. In addition to Oakland, centers are planned in St. Louis; San Antonio; Boston; Tampa, Fla.; Las Vegas; Knoxville, Tenn.; Tulsa, Okla.; and Sitka, Alaska.

Those seeking assistance from the Oakland center will have access to 25 agencies and six court services. Among the 60 on-site community partners at the Oakland center are the district attorney's office, the county sheriff's office, Oakland Police Department's special victims unit and the county probation department. Agencies and nonprofits that assist with medical care, housing, legal aid and help for specific ethnic groups are also part of the loop.

The center in Oakland and other cities are modeled after the San Diego Family Justice Center, which opened in 2002 and has served thousands of women. The center was the brainchild of Casey Gwinn, a city attorney. Gwinn pushed the replication of the San Diego center during a 2003 roundtable discussion on domestic violence with top administration officials that was organized by executives at Lifetime Television.

Holistic Approach to Helping

"You are looking at a complex and difficult problem in a holistic way," Diane M. Stuart, director of the Office on Violence Against Women, told local officials at the Oakland center's opening just before Labor Day. "We need to ask, 'How can we support someone who's been victimized through no fault of their own?'"

DOVES' Hamilton said the holistic approach was needed because abused women often don't know what they need. Like Coleman, women may come in for housing and only then do experts see that they need other services.

Judge George Hernandez, Jr., of Alameda County, who tries many domestic violence cases, added that comprehensive services are key because "victims of domestic violence seek help from the court at the worst possible time, a time of crisis."

The Family Justice Center is opening not a moment too soon for Alameda County. The county has one of the highest rates of domestic violence incidents in California. In 2004, the docket of

the county court had 229 felony cases and nearly 2,000 misdemeanor cases of domestic violence. And those are just the cases that reached the court's attention.

A task force convened by state Attorney General Bill Lockyer issued a scathing report in July that accused California's criminal-justice system of failing to adequately respond to domestic violence.

The panel found, after a two-year study, that the courts weren't issuing restraining orders, even when required by law. Among those restraining orders that were issued, many were never served. The panel also found that abusers were allowed to own firearms, a violation of restraining orders.

In addition, attendance at court-ordered programs for batterers wasn't tracked, so batterers may not have completed or even attended the programs.

"The report creates a blueprint for what needs to be fixed," said Alameda County District Attorney Tom Orloff, who served on the task force that drew up the report.

Among the recommendations is for prosecutors to enlist community advocates to help domestic violence victims, something not being done frequently enough in California.

Coleman said she wishes such a center existed when she was being abused. She remembers spending days on buses with her two small children going from program to program in search of help.

"This is a one-stop shop, and that's what we needed," she said.

Today, her kids are both honor students and the family is doing well. "You can't tell now," she said of her sons. "You would never know they had been through any domestic violence at all."

Rebecca Vesely is a health care reporter at the Oakland Tribune.

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