

Chattanooga Times Free Press (Tennessee)

September 30, 2006 Saturday

Security Aim of Violence Shelters

By Chloé Morrison, Staff Writer

[DALTON, Ga.] – Domestic violence victims have 43 certified shelters in Georgia they can turn to for help, but even with classified locations, officials said a victim's safety can never be guaranteed.

“I hate to say this (but) I will never tell a woman, ‘You will be safe here,’” said Betty Higgins, executive director of the Northwest Georgia Family Crisis Center in Dalton. “I believe we have a network that allows for more safety. We are more likely to help (a woman) than she will be able to help herself.”

Unlike a recent case in Sylva, N.C., where a man was accused of gunning down his wife at a domestic violence shelter, Mrs. Higgins said there have been no violent occurrences at her facility. An intruder once climbed the fence, but was arrested immediately, she said.

Area officials said precautions, from security systems to intruder drills, ensure the safety of victims at local shelters. In Georgia, it is a misdemeanor to reveal the location of a shelter, Mrs. Higgins said.

Beth Peters is outreach coordinator for domestic violence in Gordon County, Ga.

“I bet you could poll 20 people in Dalton, and I don't think you'd find someone who knew where the shelter was,” Ms. Peters said.

There's a 6-foot fence around the Dalton shelter. The facility also has an alarm system and an “awake and observant” staff on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week, she said.

The staff also practices intruder drills, she said. “I have someone come and try to break in,” Mrs. Higgins said. “If the intruder can get in, you have failed.”

Hospitality House, a shelter in Rome, Ga., is equipped with security cameras and anyone entering the facility has to be buzzed in by an employee, Executive Director Lynn Rouseau said.

Hospitality House has had two cases where someone came to the shelter looking for a victim, Mrs. Rouseau said.

Last week, a man came to the facility looking for his wife, Mrs. Rouseau said. Police were called and the intruder was taken off the premises and told not to return, she said.

Another time, a woman was waiting for the bus in front of the shelter. The abuser saw her and beat her up. A witness called police and the man is still in jail, Mrs. Rouseau said.

Shelter officials said they work closely with law enforcement. Often, police will escort a victim to the shelter.

“We have taken security measures to protect the facility,” Catoosa County Sheriff Phil Summers said.

Area officials said domestic violence is a significant problem.

“Domestic violence calls, as far as crime, are the No. 2 complaint we receive,” Sheriff Summers said. “Traffic issues are No. 1.”

Walker County Sheriff Steve Wilson said his county averages more than three domestic violence calls a day.

“Not all of those result in an arrest or a victim having to go to a shelter,” he said. “But there is quite a large number of those victims who do need services.”

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation reported that Catoosa County had 701 occurrences of family violence in 2003, the latest statistics available. Dade County had 112 and Walker County had 1,042 occurrences, the report stated.

The American Bar Association reported that 3 million to 4 million American women are physically abused each year by their husbands or partners, and battering is the No. 1 cause of injuries for U.S. women.

Mrs. Peters said safety in shelters is always a top priority.

“Lethality increases once you leave (an abusive relationship),” she said. “I think we are being as safe as we can be. (Safety) is something we should look at daily.”

Assessment tools are used to determine the severity of a victim’s situation. In some cases, if a situation is severe, victims are asked not to leave the shelter or are moved to another location, officials said.

Mrs. Higgins said the security of employees at the shelter is also a consideration.

“Others are still at risk,” she said. “You don’t know if that abusive person is going to be one of those crazy ones that will kill everyone or not. The crazies don’t care who they hurt.”

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