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A Place for Justice

If the man-hours Boston Police spent answering domestic violence calls in 2004 were added together, they would come to about 7,872. That's just shy of a full calendar year (8,760 hours), not including time spent on abuse investigations or court trials, but just fielding those first cries for help. In a city already battling a wave of street crime, it's a jaw-dropping statistic about the reach of violence unfolding every day behind closed doors.

Yesterday police unveiled their newest tool to help drive these numbers down. It's not a new forensic technology or a flashy slogan. It's a building and an idea that is as simple as it is overdue the Family Justice Center, a collaborative one-stop center for people who have suffered domestic abuse and want to make a new life safe from their tormentors.

If this million-dollar effort succeeds, 989 Commonwealth Ave. in Brighton will become a vitally important and heavily trafficked address. It is open for business not just for victims in Boston but all of Suffolk County, and a person who walks inside its doors looking for help will find 35,000 square feet of it counselors, legal aid, family advocates, drop-in childcare, temporary foster homes for pets, even a hot meal. And if they choose only if they choose victims can also find detectives and prosecutors to guide them in pursuing criminal charges. Medical care, already on hand for children, will eventually be available for adults in-house as well.

Until now, a victim's phone call to police, and the beating that caused it, were just the beginning of a much longer ordeal. Getting help often meant crisscrossing the city for critical services. And victims have inevitably felt pinned between the two traditionally antagonistic responders to domestic abuse advocates who are bound to protect clients' confidentiality and police who require cooperation to prosecute abusers. Now, thanks to one of a dozen federal grants given out in 2003 to fund such one-stop centers, Boston has a chance to tear down that wall of distrust in a way that will help victims build new lives and also help police build cases.

Of course, in order to build either, people who need this place have to find it. One of the center's biggest challenges will be its Brighton location. For some, a center on the Green Line will be convenient enough. Even for some who live far away, Brighton may provide much-needed anonymity. But in a city where a neighborhood can be a self-contained universe, the distance is bound to pose an obstacle to victims who are often already reluctant to get help.

Many of the city's domestic violence cases come from neighborhoods also hard hit by street violence Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury and other poor neighborhoods, such as South Boston and Charlestown, that are distant from Brighton. Now that police and advocates have figured out how to work together under the same roof, they must extend their reach in every direction of the city and county. And if this experiment works, it may be well worth recreating this kind of building, and idea, across town.

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