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Victims of Domestic Violence Get Help to Escape, Halt Abuse

By Kim Bell, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

When Lois Doty stepped off the elevator onto the sixth floor of a downtown office building, she saw a waiting room bathed in warm pastels. It was a comforting atmosphere. No pressure.

She had just left a jealous boyfriend who had put a box cutter to her throat and threatened to cover her head with a bag.

Doty, 34, needed help. The St. Patrick Center told her about a new agency on Olive Street for victims of domestic violence. And what Doty experienced there in May, she said, was a life-saver.

“These people are God-sent,” she said Friday. “You’re right at home. They’re not judgmental.”

The St. Louis Family Justice Center, at 1139 Olive Street, serves victims of domestic violence. Thirteen agencies have offices on the sixth floor – from a nurse practitioner who can photograph bruises and test for sexually transmitted diseases, to a lawyer who helps accompany a victim to the courthouse to get an order of protection.

Having the free services under one roof is a big selling point, especially for someone such as Doty, whose only transportation is a city bus line.

In the past, victims who got up the courage to report domestic abuse would have to make five or six stops around town – and spend a day or more doing it – to accomplish everything the Family Justice Center now offers.

“We can cab victims in, give them bus passes,” said Mary Deverman, the center’s executive director. “What we’ve tried to do is eliminate all the barriers to someone receiving services.”

Doty has already come for two counseling sessions and is going to court next week for a hearing on her protective order.

The center opened in January, fueled by a \$1.25 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. It is one of 15 such centers around the country, most of which were established by President George W. Bush’s Family Justice Center initiative.

The St. Louis center is modeled after one in San Diego, which opened in 2002. San Diego's center serves more than 800 clients a month and handles more than 3,000 phone calls a month.

Since its opening, the St. Louis center has helped about 250 people, most of them walk-ins, and handled 300 phone calls.

Agency leaders expect the number of clients to climb to about 2,000 a year. They know the need is huge: Last year, St. Louis police handled more than 23,300 domestic disturbance calls, and the courts in St. Louis granted about 3,500 orders of protection.

The center is under the nonprofit St. Louis Family Violence Council. More than 40 agencies have partnered in the venture. The 13 on-site agencies include ALIVE (Alternatives to Living in Violent Environments); Legal Services of Eastern Missouri; Missouri Social Services' children's division; and the St. Louis police.

Once in the lobby, visitors can rest on a couch next to an end table holding flowers and a box of tissues. There is a children's playroom, and a family room with a TV and dining room table. The staff calls people who come in for help their "guests."

But the comfortable digs have security measures in case the abusers show up: The reception desk is guarded by bulletproof glass, and every door into the back hallways opens only with a secret code. So far, the St. Louis center hasn't had any trouble.

Jay Fisk, an attorney with Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, said some lawyers who took turns staffing the office at the Family Justice Center had gotten so involved in the victims' cases that they went beyond legal advice. Some have begun escorting the victims to the Civil Courts building two blocks away to apply for a protection order.

"When we first started, we were supposed to sit here, take notes and give legal advice," said one of those lawyers, Don Hood. "I became frustrated really early, like I wasn't doing enough, and I started walking them down to the courthouse."

Hood, who volunteers his time for Legal Services, said he had helped some victims in dicey situations.

"We've put them into cabs and they're going somewhere else, maybe out of state, and they have to leave now or they'll be killed," he said. "We're dealing with dangerous people; some of these abusers are men with rap sheets as long as my arms and legs."

Before the center opened, organizers invited victims of domestic violence to be part of a focus group to help planners decide what to include. Having services for children was one of their suggestions. Other little tips: Have plants around to make it homey, and don't leave the walls blank.

One woman in the focus group was Patricia, a mother of three children, who spent months in 2004 trying to get out of an abusive situation. She said that she had been mentally and verbally abused by her then-husband, and that her daughter had been sexually abused by him.

“I didn’t have any resources, and I was doing it all on my own,” said Patricia, who did not want her last name used. “I had to get a restraining order for the kids. I had to get counseling. I had to visit a lawyer.”

If the Family Justice Center had been available two years ago, Patricia said, “it would have really de-stressed my life a lot. It would have gotten us help faster, and I would have had other people to talk to.”

To let people know about her agency, Deverman has talked to community groups, emergency room employees and school social workers. In May, a bus brought pregnant high school students and young mothers trying to finish school to the Family Justice Center for a tour.

Deverman also hung posters and left the agency’s business cards in restrooms at Grace Hill health centers that provide care in low-income neighborhoods.

“The cards are small enough that a woman can hide it in her bra strap or shoe,” Deverman said.

The center is seeing many non-English-speaking victims of abuse. The brochure and intake forms are available in Spanish, and the center is working on getting them translated for people who have come here from Bosnia and Somalia.

Right now, it takes about \$500,000 a year to run the center. That pays rent, the salaries of a nurse practitioner, two staffers and an administrative assistant and other costs, such as supplies and transportation fees for clients.

The Central Reform Congregation held a diaper drive and donates homemade meals of meatloaf and macaroni and cheese that are kept in the center’s freezer for the needy who come in for help.

Before the federal grant runs out in March, the center plans to apply for other grants and hold fundraisers to attract donations from private and corporate sources.

“Domestic violence is not polite dinner-party conversation; it’s a hard topic to approach,” Deverman said. “The Family Justice Center shows that a real commitment has been made to try to address this very serious problem in a more proactive way.”

Find Out More

The St. Louis Family Justice Center, at 1139 Olive Street downtown, is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

For more information, contact the center’s staff at 314-241-0077.

One-Stop Help

The Family Justice Center includes 13 agencies, from a nurse practitioner who can photograph bruises and test for STDs, to a lawyer who can answer legal questions.

Meeting a Need

City police handled 23,300 domestic disturbance calls last year. The center expects 2,000 clients annually.

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