

New tack against domestic violence

Program identifies high-risk cases

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By Tanya Pérez-Brennan

A domestic-violence prevention program in Framingham is using a \$91,000 federal grant to develop an innovative approach that is aimed at identifying high-risk cases early and coordinating help for victims across different agencies.

The local Voices Against Violence program, run by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, was the only recipient of the grant in Middlesex County. It is modeled after a program started in Newburyport three years ago that coordinates efforts by advocates for domestic-violence victims, the courts, and law enforcement. Although integration across agencies has been done before, such a comprehensive effort is uncommon, authorities say.

"I'm not aware of other places where there's a committed, sustained, systemwide effort," said Sue Chandler, director of the community advocacy program at the Boston-based Center for Community Health Education, Research and Service. "They're sort of above and beyond what the rest of us have been able to do."

The Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center Inc. in Newburyport created the new model after a client was killed by her husband in 2005, said Kelly Dunne, the center's associate director.

Statewide last year, 55 people died in incidents of domestic violence, according to Toni Troop, a spokeswoman for Jane Doe Inc., part of the Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence.

Framingham recorded 354 domestic-violence cases last year, according to a Police Department spokesman, Lieutenant Paul Shastany, with the list including assaults, restraining-order violations, and domestic threats. However, he said, a Framingham woman, Carla Souza, and her 11-year-old son, Caique, were killed in May 2006 in what police believe was a case of domestic violence.

The grant to implement the program in Framingham is guaranteed only for this year, said Mary Gianakis, director of Voices Against Violence. But there is a potential for additional funding to cover another two years. The new model will be used in Framingham the first year, with the goal of expanding to other area communities in the future.

The purpose of the program's "high-risk domestic violence case response team" is to identify potential victims early in the process and prevent repeat offenders from causing more harm, Gianakis said.

"It provides us with a better picture of what's going on and helps us to increase safety and also to make sure we're holding perpetrators accountable," Gianakis said.

At Newburyport's Geiger center, Dunne said that the aim of many domestic-violence programs is to keep victims away from their batterers by placing them in shelters, often in a different community. But the new approach strives to create a "safety zone" so victims can avoid going into a shelter, which is disruptive to family life.

"The hope was we could create safety options beyond the shelter option," Dunne said.



Framingham police believe Carla Souza and her son were killed in 2006 in a case of domestic violence.

The model is based on a high-risk assessment method developed by Jacquelyn Campbell, a domestic-violence expert and professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing.

Dunne said the coordinated approach among agencies in Newburyport has already shown concrete results, noting that 75 percent of the center's 31 cases over the past two years resulted in the incarceration of batterers.

The staff of the Newburyport center helped develop a similar program in New Bedford in 2006, and won a national award in October for creating the first such program model in the state, according to Dunne.

Now the Newburyport staff is working with Framingham advocates and police officials.

One of the key elements in implementing the model in Framingham will be training local officers, according to Gianakis. Police are to start a two-month training program within a few weeks, followed by monthly meetings beginning in June and full implementation of the model in six months.

Though the Framingham police used to have a domestic violence unit with three detectives assigned to it, federal grant money dried up over the years and the unit was closed down, said Deputy Police Chief Ken Ferguson.

But the new model will help the department focus on the high-risk cases, he said.

"We're going to be able to bridge gaps between organizations, get the courts involved, and give a better response to the serious domestic-violence cases," Ferguson said. ■

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