



New grants and merger helping to better support victims of domestic violence

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By

Families embroiled in divorce and custody conflicts that involve domestic abuse will soon get more support in **Cuyahoga County's Domestic Relations Court**.

A federal grant from the Office of Violence Against Women provides \$300,000 to the court, the **Domestic Violence & Child Advocacy Center (DVCAC)**, the **Cleveland Rape Crisis Center** and **Legal Aid Society of Cleveland** to pay for two new positions and to train court staff.



DVAC

The partnership is just one example of a massive re-imagining of the way the local agencies and systems respond to domestic violence -- an issue that grips the community several times each year when it escalates in a tragic and sometimes preventable death.

This spring, a leap in the transformation took place when the Domestic Violence Center of Cleveland merged with Bellflower Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse.

Leaders of the agencies said the move was about more than combining resources and budgets. It was an acknowledgement that the issues at the heart of their missions -- domestic violence and child abuse -- were often intertwined in a way that couldn't and shouldn't be separated.

It also acknowledged that family conflict needed to be treated more holistically. The new center still provides shelter, counseling and advocacy to violence victims and children.

They also are reaching out more to under-served populations -- like those who live with disabilities of blindness and deafness.

Domestic-violence report statistics are not collected countywide, making it difficult to quantify such abuse.

But the center's 24-hour hot line gets more than 18,000 calls each year seeking help and statewide police agencies report upwards of 70,000 call yearly about domestic abuse.

One of the biggest hurdles the combined new center faces is to change a system that has often punished domestic violence victims who have children -- creating more trauma instead of responding to it, Linda Dooley Johanek, CEO of the new combined agency, said.

Johanek said that adult victims of domestic violence are often blamed for the choices they make -- even when those decisions are made under threat or duress. "What we have often seen is custody taken from an adult victim of domestic violence," said Johanek said.

She said a child might be abused by a batterer and the victim would leave, and only to have their children removed either because of the abuse or because of they didn't have the resources to take care of the child.

"As a society we were making that the victim's fault and not understanding she was in an adversarial role with the abuser and with the system," she said.

The new combined center offers counseling and resources for children and battered parents so they family can be treated as a whole -- and kept safe.

That idea is mirrored in the new model at the Domestic Relations court, Administrative Judge Diane Palos said.

Palos said the number of requests to the court for domestic violence protection orders continues to rise. In 2009, the court had 415 requests for protection orders. Last year they had 472 petitions.

And whether that's because family violence is more prevalent or people are more educated about the resources available, Palos said, the court needs to deal with the issue in a way that keeps children and families safe, while still remaining an impartial judge of the facts of a case.

A new court employee hired with the grant will act as a case manager, tracking the status of the cases involving an allegation of domestic abuse and assuring that judge and magistrate orders are followed -- something they previously did not have the staff to do.

Two federal grants boost efforts to reach domestic violence victims

The Domestic Violence & Child Advocacy Center recently received two large federal grants for increased outreach, training and advocacy for domestic violence victims and their children

An advocate, employed by the DVAC with an office in the court's building, will assist people petitioning for protection and usher them through the process. The advocate can support a victim while allowing court employees to remain neutral in disputes.

"Ethically you can take the position that we are the court and should only be concerned with performing our jobs and upholding the law fairly," Palos said. "But you can also take the position that we are a family court and that we need to first do no harm. . . Family law is about human lives and children. Here we have the same goal. For victims to be safe and for children to be safe."

Palos said the court employees will get special training in sexual assault from the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center because they are seeing more cases where sexual assault is used as a method of domestic abuse.

They also are going to learn more about the various types of domestic violence so they can understand and differentiate between cases involving chronic batterers and situations where a person commits what is likely a one-time act of violence based on particularly stressful situation.

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