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Victims of abuse find new outlet

Alameda County Family Justice Center to address domestic, sexual violence under one roof in Oakland

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Inside Bay Area

OAKLAND — Bay Area family advocates are combining forces to combat domestic violence and sexual abuse in a revitalized downtown health facility.

"We're excited about the opening," said Lisa Foster, director of Alameda County Victims' Services. "We're hoping more victims will come forward, because services are all in one place."

The Alameda County Family Justice Center at 27th Street and Telegraph Avenue is a collaboration involving at least 20 public agencies and private nonprofit organizations in an effort to provide "one-stop" services to victims and their families.

Alameda County received \$1.2 million as one of 15 nationwide recipients of a federal Family Justice Center grant, a pilot program designed to consolidate all victims' resources into one location.

The Oakland site will bring counselors, medical technicians, social workers, investigators, probation officers, interpreters, career consultants and district attorneys together to help victims.

"We've got a tremendous group of people coming together," said Nancy O'Malley, Alameda County's chief assistant to the district attorney. "One of our goals is to provide resources currently not being provided."

Services will range from emergency food and housing to job-placement assistance. There will be specialized resources for elderly, deaf and non-English-speaking residents, O'Malley said. All services will be free and confidential. The center is scheduled to open July 11. Located at 27th Street and Telegraph Avenue, the nondescript three-story building is based at the former Alameda County Central Health Clinic, which closed two years ago and fell into disrepair, said Harold Boscovich.

Boscovich is a retired director of the victim assistance division of the Alameda County district attorney's office, who is ensuring that every inch of the center's 21,000 square feet is "comfortable and kid-friendly." He's supervising installation of donated furniture and a new coat of paint to replace the peeling brown facade of the center.

"It'll be a family-friendly place," he said. "We're here to help everyone feel more at home."

Marcia Blackstock, executive director of Bay Area Women Against Rape, agrees. "This is a great opportunity to be in close proximity with a variety of services and a wide array of agencies to refer to," she said.

She said Women Against Rape staff members will work hand-in-hand with medical technicians and counselors to treat and curb the cycle of violence caused by abuse, whether it's physical, sexual or verbal. By becoming more of a "hands-on advocate," Blackstock hopes her staff will help thousands of victims through the Byzantine process of cops, courts and counseling.

Lt. Mike Yoell, commander of Oakland Police Department's Special Victims section, said his unit will continue to work on cases, ranging from physical abuse to child prostitution, at the new location.

Often victims have difficulty finding time or transportation to meet with investigators, and become discouraged with the lengthy red tape process.

Now police officers, district attorneys and numerous nonprofit legal advocates will be able to offer assistance to those who need it. But what if victims don't want to get involved with the police?

"They don't have to," Yoell said, emphasizing victims' wishes are paramount.

Much effort has been made to ensure the safety and anonymity of victims, with tinted windows at the facility, on-site police surveillance and at least half a dozen sheriff's deputies and police available at all times.

Parents with children in tow can get counseling, fill out forms or call friends and family without fear, said O'Malley. "The Alameda Family Justice Center will be a safe and comfortable location where they can be helped," she said.

Annually, more women are injured by domestic violence than auto accidents, muggings and stranger rapes combined, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC estimates nearly one-third of American women report being abused at some point in their lives, with rape being one of the most underreported crimes. More than 25,000 cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect were reported last year in Alameda County, according to the Alameda County Child Abuse Prevention Council.

Services for victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse and other forms of mistreatment were "long overdue" Boscovich said.

"It affects all of us," he said, noting the center's comprehensive approach to victims. "We'll be here for anyone who needs help."