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Abuse victims get new resource

VARIETY OF SERVICES ALL IN ONE CENTER

By Thaa Walker
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Latarya Coleman's husband shot her in the head on their third wedding anniversary. Before that assault, which Coleman survived, she had traveled the same road many domestic-violence victims do: navigating a host of agencies in an effort to seek help and a way out.

This week, Alameda County announced the opening of a federally funded center that will serve as a one-stop-shop for victims of abuse like Coleman -- one of only a handful that exist nationwide.

Inside the Family Justice Center in Oakland a victim can find law enforcement officers, prosecutors, probation officers and civil attorneys as well as therapists, chaplains and job referrals -- all under one roof.

The creation of such a centralized refuge is significant, victims and those who work with them say, because those trying to leave an abusive situation often are discouraged from doing so when they find they must shuffle between agencies scattered around town.

That problem has been especially acute in Alameda County, where victims have had to navigate 25 different agencies to do things such as file a police report, obtain a restraining order and seek medical care and counseling, said Nancy O'Malley, an Alameda County prosecutor, during a ceremony Wednesday.

``We are putting an end to that," said O'Malley, who led the effort to win funding for the center.

Though the center is primarily intended for Alameda County residents, efforts will be made to assist those who come from elsewhere, coordinator Kathy Moore said.

Alameda County competed nationally to win \$1.3 million of \$20 million in federal grant money authorized by President Bush to combat domestic violence. The center is one of only 15 in the nation and one of only two in the state. The other California site, in San Diego, has been credited with helping to reduce the number of domestic violence-related deaths in that city.

In July, Attorney General Bill Lockyer announced that a two-year study had found that California's domestic violence laws weren't being enforced despite more than 186,000 abuse calls and 169 related killings in the state in 2004. On Wednesday, Lockyer told the crowd that the center was the type of solution needed.

Children also have their own space at the center: a room on the second floor filled with teddy bears, crayons and books. Children's Hospital and Research Center of Oakland has transferred its therapy program for children exposed to domestic violence to the center.

Coleman's two young sons went through that program in 2002, a year after she was shot by her estranged husband, who also shot and killed himself.

After the attack, the couple's sons seemed to slip away. Her youngest, a kindergartner, acted out; he shoved grass in the mouth of another child one day and told him to eat it.

Her sons are better now, she said, and the family has moved from Hayward to Atlanta. But she is aware of the new Alameda County center and endorses it.

``You've already got all of this on your mind, you're going through trying to get out and get things done," she said by phone. ``It's a great idea -- one place to go to get all your help."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Family Justice Center is at 470 27th St. in Oakland. Phone: (510) 267-8800.

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