

## **Family Justice Center dreams take shape**

By Lauren Keene | Enterprise staff writer | February 18, 2011 09:15

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She was brought to Yolo County from Mexico, leaving her family and friends behind. Here, the beatings began, violent assaults by her husband that often took place in front of the couple's young children.

Finally, she'd had enough. The woman contacted an advocate from the Yolo County District Attorney's Office, who offered a list of all the legal, law-enforcement and children's services available to her.

Problem was, that list required visits to at least 13 different agencies, most of them in Woodland. The woman, who lived across the county in West Sacramento, had no car or driver's license.

'She was so isolated,' said Laura Valdes, the domestic violence advocate. And while that woman eventually found a way to get the help she needed, there are others who get so discouraged they find it easier to return to their abusers.

'I've had many cases like that,' Valdes said. Victims, she added, 'need to know there is a network out there supporting them.'

On Thursday, about two dozen Yolo County educators, law-enforcement officers, domestic violence advocates and social service representatives gathered at Woodland's Community Center to discuss the possible creation of a local Family Justice Center, where family violence victims can obtain all the services they need under one roof.

Those services might include filing a police report, talking to a prosecutor, applying for a restraining order, and receiving counseling services, job training or other support. Funding is expected to be minimal, with participating agencies assigning existing staff to the center.

With the poor economy contributing to a rise in domestic violence, now is the time to create efficiency and accessibility, organizers say.

'It's about bringing together services that already exist,' said Casey Gwinn, president of the National Family Justice Center Alliance in San Diego, which opened the first-ever Family Justice Center in October 2002. Three months later, Gwinn touted the program on Oprah Winfrey's television show.

'Within two years we had site visits from 70 countries,' Gwinn said. Today, there are 76 operating family justice centers across the United States. There are another 140 in the planning stages.

'This is an opportunity for agencies to ... give up their turf and say, 'How can we do it different? How can we do it better?' ' Gwinn said. 'This is not a question of resources. This is a question of priorities.'

A proposed justice center in Yolo County has been in the planning stages since the fall of 2009. Leaders of the effort include Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza, Sheriff Ed Prieto, District Attorney Jeff Reisig, Chief Deputy District Attorney Jonathan Raven and Jean Jordan of the California District Attorneys Association.

Raven admitted he once thought the concept would never work in Yolo County 'because we're too small, in resources and size.' Other centers were opening in much larger jurisdictions, such as Alameda, Los Angeles and San Diego counties.

But then came seed money from Verizon and interest from UC Davis' Family Protection Clinic, Raven said. Similar-sized counties such as Solano and Sonoma began planning their own Family Justice Centers.

The results have been more successful prosecutions, fewer case dismissals and decreases in homicide rates.

Focus groups comprising family violence survivors share a common vision of how a Family Justice Center should look, Gwinn said. It should be warm and inviting, furnished like a living room with quilts and other artwork adorning the walls. Legal services and counseling were among the most-desired resources.

The center also should be kid-friendly, survivors said, with access to child care and other children's activities. Job and financial planning assistance, immigration services and transportation also rank high on the wish list.

Two potential locations for a center in Yolo County have already been identified -one of them a building adjacent to, but detached from, the West Sacramento Police Department, offering an element of safety and security. Vacant space within the Yolo County Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Center's Woodland headquarters also is being considered.

But some say a Yolo County program also should offer mobile services that visit communities whose residents can't easily get to a center.

On Thursday, participants in the planning summit interviewed one another to determine the strengths and best practices their agencies bring to the table. The results: collaboration, multicultural/multilingual services, communication skills, political support and a commitment to training.

Others stressed the importance of taking a 'holistic approach' to family violence cases - treating the entire family so that the cycle of violence comes to a halt.

'If we don't really look at the entire family ... we're never going to solve this problem,' Jordan said. 'If doing what we did in the past worked, we all wouldn't be sitting here.'

Davis Police Chief Landy Black said he's uncertain what role the Davis Police Department would play at a family justice center. His department, already limited in resources, handles anywhere from 80 to 100 domestic violence incidents each year.

That's far fewer than some other Yolo County communities, Black said, which likely wouldn't demand the presence of a full-time officer. But he envisions Davis contributing through intervention efforts, much like the Police Department's youth intervention and crime-prevention programs.

'We need to have that same sort of ethic here, too,' Black said. A person seeking the justice center's services may spread the word to others, and 'gain the inner strength that prevents them from becoming a victim again.'

The planning summit continued today with participants breaking into groups to create 'checklists' of tasks that need to be fulfilled in order for a Family Justice Center to become reality.