

Under One Roof

One-stop centers offer a safer future for victims of domestic violence **BY SUZIE BOSS**

DURING A PARTICULARLY horrendous week in late 2009, three murder-suicides in Oregon claimed the lives of six adults and two children. At least two of these domestic violence victims were in the process of ending their troubled relationships. One woman, gunned down by her estranged husband at her suburban Portland workplace, had just filed for divorce. Another, killed at home along with her 4-year-old son, had obtained a restraining order against her boyfriend.

“Most of the women who die in domestic violence in America die after they’ve sought a restraining order, after they’ve called the police, after some interaction with the system,” says Casey Gwinn, president of the National Family Justice Center Alliance (NFJCA).

The system can work better, Gwinn insists, if communities make it easier for victims to access the comprehensive services they need. He helped pioneer the concept of a “one-stop shop” for domestic violence services in San Diego. Since 2002, when police, prosecutors, social service agencies, and nonprofit advocates came together under the same roof at the San Diego Family Justice Center, the city has seen a 90 percent drop in intimate partner homicides. Victims now access a wider range of services, starting with a danger assessment to plan for their immediate safety. Heightened collaboration among agencies has generated system-changing ideas and fostered public-private support. But the most dramatic outcome, Gwinn says, may be this: “Women aren’t dying anymore when they come into our system.”

This wraparound model is spreading as other communities look for strategies to curb domestic violence. It’s an issue that costs the United States more than \$5.8 billion annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some 60 independently operated family justice centers have opened, in communities as different as Brooklyn, N.Y., and Sitka, Alaska. New Orleans opened a center after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the patchwork of services that had existed, “and it’s been a bright spot in a community that’s still recovering,” says Director Mary Claire Landry. Similar programs are under way internationally in Jordan, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. The NFJCA, headquartered in San Diego, has become an engine for replication.

LEARNING BY LISTENING

Gwinn didn’t plan on a career in domestic violence advocacy. In 1985, as a new prosecutor in San Diego, he was “asked to volunteer for the



Gael Strack and Casey Gwinn, founders of the San Diego Family Justice Center, both started in public interest law.

cases that nobody else wanted. I knew nothing about domestic violence,” he admits, and insights were hard to come by. In those early days of the domestic violence movement, policies and practices tended to blame the victim if she stayed with her abuser. A network of feminists who became Gwinn’s advisors and, eventually, his colleagues recognized that change would require finding allies within the system—including men. “I needed their help,” Gwinn says he quickly realized.

Some of the changes that have resulted came from simply listening to victims. “They told us how difficult it was to navigate the system,” Gwinn recalls. “They had trouble understanding the role of police and prosecutors, let alone civil legal services or social services.” Services were geographically scattershot. Many victims simply gave up.

By 1990, San Diego started bringing services together by locating staff from five agencies in the same building. When Gwinn was elected San Diego city attorney in 1996, he used his bully pulpit and city resources to push for a more comprehensive approach. The San Diego Family Justice Center opened in 2002, with staff from 27 agencies—including a special unit of the police department—sharing three floors of a former bank. Co-locating created unanticipated changes, starting with how agencies work together.

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Gael Strack, former assistant city attorney, took a collaborative leadership approach when she became the first center director. “She understood how to bring people together when they don’t work for you,” Gwinn says. Simple routines such as a morning meeting got people from multiple agencies talking and, eventually, building relationships. “The magic is not co-location,” Gwinn says. “It’s the processes you put in place to cause people to interact with each other every day.”

Each innovation that emerged has reflected a “victim-centered, survivor-driven” philosophy. “It’s no different from a well-run venture in any consumer-oriented sector,” Gwinn says. “If you don’t know what your consumers want, you’ll never provide it.” Focus groups and exit interviews with clients have helped staff fine-tune services. But each victim decides for herself which services she’s ready to take advantage of.

The first month it opened, the San Diego center served 87 clients. Two years later, it was serving 1,200 monthly. A client named Sally said the program “made an extremely uncomfortable and embarrassing experience bearable.” Adds Gwinn, “We found out, if you build it they will come—and they will keep coming back if you’ve built a safe place that’s responsive to their needs.”

MOMENTUM FOR A MOVEMENT

What began as one city’s innovative idea quickly gained momentum. Oprah Winfrey’s endorsement on national television in January 2003 raised visibility and brought visitors to San Diego from around the world. Later that year, the U.S. Department of Justice awarded \$20 million to 15 communities (out of 400 applicants) to start their own centers. The NFJCA, established in 2006 and headed by Gwinn and Strack, has become the go-to technical assistance provider for new centers.

In a new book about this movement, *Dream Big: A Simple, Complicated Idea to Stop Family Violence*, Gwinn acknowledges both the simplicity of the one-stop model and the complexity of replicating it. Each community has to summon the will to get started, he says, along with the vision to adapt the model to fit local needs.

A few important lessons stand out:

Form an interdisciplinary community leadership team: Ideally, Gwinn says, the team should include “a visionary, big-picture thinker,” along with representatives from law enforcement and the prosecutor’s office, a community-based advocate, and a survivor of domestic violence.

Learn together: San Diego and other established centers have become learning labs, where visitors can observe best practices. NFJCA has produced books, toolkits, webinars, and other online resources to guide everything from hiring practices to client intake procedures.

Plan strategically: Planning to launch a program may take a year or longer. Cleveland, which has engaged NFJCA staff for assistance, is close to securing start-up funding from the county after years of lobbying, according to Municipal Judge Ronald Adrine. “We also want to convince the philanthropic community and the corporate

WHEN CO-LOCATING SERVICES

Ask clients what they need

Build genuine collaboration among agencies

Identify and share best practices

community to be part of this and make it sustainable,” he says. “That takes time.”

Adapt to each community: No two family justice centers are exactly alike. Gwinn says local agencies often have to work through “power and control issues, turf battles,” he says, before collaboration can take hold.

DATA TO MAKE THE CASE

Portland’s Gateway Center for Domestic Violence Services, open since September 2010, resides in a homey building, painted yellow with bright flowers blooming outside. But there’s no effort to disguise what happens here. Billboards around the city advertise the brand-new center’s services. “Compared with the confidential shelters, we’re loud and proud,” says Gateway Director Martha Strawn Morris, a lawyer who previously spent a decade working for the county family court.

Heightened visibility brings safety risks, which is why a sheriff’s deputy keeps watch and bulletproof glass shields the reception area. “If we can take some of the shame out of help seeking,” Morris says, the center will get closer to its dual goals of serving the needs of victims and preventing future domestic violence.

The Gateway Center borrows liberally from the one-stop model but incorporates its own innovations. A videoconferencing system connected to the county courthouse enables clients to obtain a restraining order without having to leave the safety of the building. “Victims tell us the courthouse is a scary place,” Strawn Morris says, so she convinced judges to allow ex parte motions to happen here. Gateway staff, called “navigators,” fluent in nine languages and familiar with diverse immigrant groups, work one-to-one with clients to make sure they understand all the available service options. A room reserved for teens feels like a clubhouse, but offers a place to focus on serious issues like dating violence and sex trafficking.

With \$1.3 million in start-up funding from the city of Portland, and more support from the county and a federal grant, Gateway Center is on a sound footing for at least three years. But it is already gathering data to make the case for future support. After three years of operating the New Orleans center, Landry has tracked not only a decline in domestic violence homicides but also a drop in repeat offenses. Such numbers help make the case for ongoing investment.

Nationally, centers have sustained support in lean times by drawing on both public and private resources, Gwinn says. A continuing challenge is making sure family justice centers don’t compete with existing nonprofits, such as community-based shelters.

Another challenge is “the difficulty of proving a negative,” acknowledges Judge Adrine, who has seen Cleveland struggle with its own recent spate of domestic violence homicides. “Would these deaths have happened even if we had a program in place? We can’t know that,” he says. But he does know that one homicide costs society more than \$2 million, and that’s just the price for prosecuting and incarcerating the perpetrator. A smarter investment, he insists, is offering help to people in crisis “in a place that’s safe and unthreatening.” After visiting San Diego and other centers, he adds, “you can see that this idea is not brain surgery. And you think, gosh, why haven’t we done this before?” ■