



## Court creates safe exchange zone for parents, kids

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In 2005, Kent County Family Court Judge Daniel Zemaitis asked jurists in his division to participate in a simple but telling straw poll.

They were to make a note over a 60-day period each time they came across a family involved in domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, or stalking who could use a safe, court-operated location for supervised child visitation and exchange.

The result? Almost 50 circumstances fit the bill.

"We knew we were on the right track," Zemaitis said.

The results encouraged him to continue pursuing federal funds to create a program to keep visitations on neutral territory and exchanges from occurring inside police stations.

Now his efforts are being rewarded.

A program will be set up in the downtown Grand Rapids YWCA after Kent County administrators received word last week that \$350,000 had been secured from the Office of Violence Against Women.

The "Safe Place" center will be similar to three others in the state and provide a secure location where parents can arrive at different times. About 80 custodial parents and their children with 280 families are expected to be served during the two-year pilot program that will open in January.

"They can have visitation or exchange without having to come face-to-face with their partner," said Carla Blinkhorn, executive director of YWCA of West Central Michigan, who will oversee the program. "This also reduces a lot of anxiety for the kids."

The program has been literally a life saver for a 37-year-old mother of two who agreed to speak to The Press as long as her name was not used.

The Traverse City resident has been using a similar program to allow her daughters to visit her ex-husband, whom she divorced after a brain injury caused him to develop a paranoid personality disorder.

His condition led him to collect guns and have violent outbursts that culminated when he pointed a loaded weapon at her. She and her children went to a domestic violence center the next day, but even since the divorce her husband has attempted to follow her and find out where she lives.

With plans to move to Chicago soon, she intends to use the Grand Rapids "Safe Place" center because the location is halfway between the two cities.

"I know when he does see them there's no chance that they're going to be harmed, or I'm going to be harmed. And it gives them the opportunity to have some kind of healthy relationship with their dad."

The Grand Rapids program will work similar to the one in Traverse City, which requires her husband to arrive 20 minutes before the scheduled visit. He is checked in at a separate entrance and then escorted to a visitation room where he is locked in with a staff member.

His ex-wife then arrives five minutes before the meeting at an opposite entrance and is taken to a room that locks from the inside before her daughters are taken to see their father while a staff member is present.

After the visit, her ex-husband remains in the locked room with a staff member for 20 minutes after she and her children leave the building.

"It's nice because kids aren't having to witness all the grow-up stuff," she said.

"They should just know they have two parents that love them and want to spend time with them, not all the ugly stuff."

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