



New program aids domestic violence victims

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KENT COUNTY -- There was a time in Kent County when victims of domestic violence had few choices -- mainly run and hope to find a safe place or stay with the abuser.

Next year, there will be another option: permanent housing.

The YWCA of West Central Michigan, with a \$570,000 grant from Michigan State Housing Development Authority and \$150,000 from Steelcase Foundation, will buy and refurbish three duplexes and buy three apartments in Kent County for permanent housing for domestic violence survivors.

Currently, there are 27 apartments in transitional housing for domestic violence survivors where they can stay for up to two years.

Emergency shelters give 250 women up to 30 days to find housing.

"Shelter is a response to the crisis but doesn't get them to housing, employment, child care. Transitional housing starts that process," said Carla Blinkhorn, YWCA president.

Training available

While working with the YWCA, the women receive training for employment and education.

Organizers also work with the women on safety planning.

The residences will offer security cameras outside. They can get more security features in cases of emergencies.

"We do that now with women who are in highly lethal situations. We want to design security very much around what their needs are," said Blinkhorn.

There is a constant need for transitional housing.

The latest figures from the 2005 Health of Kent County report show 3,000 reported cases of physical assaults by current or former intimates.

Keeping their jobs

"We have a constant waiting lists for transitional housing. A variety of women come in underemployed or unemployed and that can be a direct result of domestic violence," Blinkhorn said.

They have seen clients whose abusive mates won't allow them to work or go to school. If they have jobs, they often are stalked at work and harassed and lose their jobs.

Women at the poverty level of \$16,740 with three dependents would pay 30 percent of their income for housing.

About seven years ago, the YWCA did a study of women who returned to a shelter five times or more.

"There is an expectation that women leave many times more before making a permanent break. What we heard over and over was that not finding safe, affordable housing kept them coming back to their assailant." Blinkhorn said.

The goal is for women to stay in their own homes.

"But, for too many women, the violence is too severe." Blinkhorn said.

The YWCA is looking for duplexes it can rehabilitate with the nonprofit Dwelling Place, a community development organization.

The residents will own the homes, and the YWCA and Dwelling Place are responsible for finding the units, rehabbing and managing them.

Currently, there is no permanent housing program in Kent County specifically for domestic violence survivors.

Providing permanent housing for domestic violence victims is one step in a long-term effort, Blinkhorn said.

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