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Agency's family visitation center in jeopardy

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[Keren Rivas / Times-News](#)

A cut in funds has put a visitation center and safe exchange program for families with domestic violence problems in jeopardy.

And those in charge want the public's help.

Joy Ciriano, executive director for Family Abuse Services of Alamance County, said that as of June, the organization will stop receiving the \$80,000 grant from the Governor's Crime Commission that has allowed these programs to operate.

For the past four years, Family Abuse Services has been operating the programs as part of a partnership with Healthy Alamance, which successfully submitted a grant to the Governor's Crime Commission to establish the programs in 2004.

Since then, the Burlington Police Department has been acting as the site for safe exchanges by providing a secure place for

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She said the organization has funds to continue the programs for a couple of more months and is actively looking for other grants. However, she said those grants are not going to be available immediately. Alamance County United Way also provides funding.

Ciriano said they would like to continue operating both programs but if not enough funds are raised, they would have to do away with the visitation center.

For those in the judicial system who rely on these programs, the news that the services may be discontinued is unsettling.

"I'm very, very concerned about that," said Chief District Court Judge Jim Roberson. The programs, he said, "have turned out to be a wonderful tool for us to use to defuse domestic violence issues by having monitored exchanges and supervised visitations."

He said that many times in the past, when no supervision was available, violence typically was the end result.

In all, the organization supervises exchanges three times a week and visitations two times a week. Biebel said that close to 100 people have received services every year through the programs. A lot of them, she said, have been participating in one or both programs for years. That translates to 649 supervised visits and exchanges during the 2007 fiscal year and 552 during the past nine months.

"It's all about the children," Biebel said. "It boils down to promoting healthy and safe relationships," she said, adding that the programs not only protect the children involved but their parents as well.

Whether one of the parties is a victim of domestic violence or a parent who has faced false accusations, having a structured, professional place gives them a safe environment, she said.

"People are not exchanging at McDonalds," Biebel said, and fewer children are being exposed to confrontations between their parents. "We are avoiding all of that," she said.

Judge Roberson said that it will take an effort by the community to maintain the programs. He encouraged anyone who can to consider supporting this "worthy endeavor."

"We need help from the community to make this work, to get this back on track," he said. "It has developed into an essential part of dealing with domestic violence in Alamance County."

For more information about the programs, contact Family Abuse Services at 336-226-5982. Contributions can be made to Family Abuse Services of Alamance County, 142 S. Lexington Ave., Burlington, NC 27215.

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