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Shelters hurting from economy

BY MARIA HERNE
STAFF WRITER

mherne@republicanherald.com

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The tough economic times are making things even more painful for victims of domestic violence.

The dwindling number of sustainable jobs and increasing lack of affordable, safe housing has caused a crisis situation for agencies that serve these victims, said Sarah T. Casey, executive director of Schuylkill Women in Crisis, Pottsville.

Battered women seeking refuge at the Schuylkill Women in Crisis emergency shelter, who usually stayed an average of 17 days, are staying longer, closer to 28 days or more, she said.

"In this economy, it's getting harder for people to find jobs and get back on their feet and find a place to live," Casey said. "The shelter is filled to capacity most nights and women are staying longer in shelter."

Dianne Walters, a former SWIC client, lost her job when SWIC's weaving business, The Grateful Thread, was forced to close its retail store in Pottsville because of a sharp decline in sales over the last year, which SWIC officials have attributed to the poor economy.

Walters struggled for months to find a job. She's now working part time but is looking for full-time work to support herself and her daughter.

She said she sympathizes with those who want to leave an abusive relationship but are worried about financial issues.

"It was hard for me and it's even harder now when there's not that many jobs out there, and if you have children and no work experience, no car, no place to live," said Walters, who now volunteers at SWIC in the weaving business which they have decided to continue on a limited basis. "I know how it is out there. I'm really struggling right now, too."

These days, more clients are also seeking help from SWIC for other services, such as relocation and legal services, Casey said.

"In the past, more women who might have been able to pay for these things themselves are now unable to do so because of limited income," she said.

As the recession pushes more families out of work, problems with money and housing can exacerbate domestic violence. Victims who lose jobs might be blamed — and attacked — as a result. Batterers, already predisposed to violence, might use their financial problems as another excuse to take out their stress and frustration on others through violence, Casey said.

In January, the National Domestic Violence Hotline released data suggesting a link between financial stress and domestic violence. For victims who called NDVH during the six week study, 54 percent reported a change in their household's financial situation in the past year.

"It's like a pressure cooker," Csey said. "When things are even more challenging, it might make the abuser even more likely to lash out."

And rising unemployment rates makes it more likely that victims may not be getting child support because of job losses of a dependent child's parent, said Casey, who added that the bleak economic picture may also be forcing more women to stay in an abusive situation for fear that they have nowhere else to go and won't

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To help alleviate its tight quarters in its emergency shelter, SWIC officials recently opened another four-family transitional housing unit which provides domestic violence victims with a two-year umbrella of services and housing until they are ready to make it one their own.

The agency is in the midst of a fund raising campaign, which would expand emergency shelter capacity to 32 people.

In April, SWIC launched its Quarter Century Capital Campaign with a goal of raising \$2 million to expand and renovate its emergency shelter for area women and children who have become homeless as the result of domestic violence.

The increased shelter space would eliminate the need to turn people away, which they've had to do last year several times because there was no room.

To date, SWIC has raised \$940,000 and has received a \$1 million matching grant from the state, which was secured by state Reps. Neal Goodman, D-123, and Tim Seip, D-125.

The agency still needs about \$40,000 to reach its goal, said Casey, who said the agency it could start its renovation project this spring if the goal is met.

On the federal level, the budgets of two key funding sources — the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act the Victims of Crime Act — were slashed in the past year

By summer, the stimulus package outlined by President Obama may restore some of that funding and provide more funds for agencies that help victims of domestic violence, Casey said.

SWIC is a private, nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive services for victims of domestic violence and their families that assists nearly 1,200 victims annually.

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