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Cuts Ravage California Domestic Abuse Program

By [JESSE MCKINLEY](#)

SAN FRANCISCO — The Riley Center does not advertise its location, in a three-story Victorian in San Francisco's core. The center's address is confidential to protect its tenants: dozens of women and children fleeing abusive relationships.

While those who live at the Riley Center are often desperate for help, so is the center itself and dozens like it across California.

Because of cuts in state financing, several domestic violence shelters in California have closed in recent months, with layoffs or fewer full-time staff members at many others. Legal services — like help obtaining restraining orders — have been curtailed, as has counseling.

The Riley Center has eliminated six beds and combined its emergency services with its longer-term transitional program.

Shelters have also dropped 24-hour services, cut overnight staff at emergency centers and eliminated more comprehensive services like safe visitation centers, where staff members are posted when children are dropped off or picked up as part of custody agreements.

"Our members are struggling to keep their doors open," said Tara Shabazz, the executive director of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, which represents the state's nonprofit shelters.

In July, Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) eliminated the remaining financing for the state's Domestic Violence Program — some \$16 million — in the face of a lingering budget gap of nearly \$500 million. Legislators had closed most, but not all, of a \$24 billion deficit.

Mr. Schwarzenegger has said he regretted the decision but had no choice. "The governor understands how difficult these cuts are," said Aaron McLear, a spokesman. "But he can't promise money we don't have."

Other states, including New Jersey and Illinois, have struggled to find ways to keep domestic violence centers open, but national advocacy groups say no state has gone as far as California in "zeroing out" domestic violence money.

"California is by far the most extreme and shocking example," said Sue Else, the president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, a group in Washington. "We're appalled that this is the way that the governor would seek to balance the budget."

The cuts to the program, which is part of the State Department of Public Health, means that the 94

nonprofit agencies charged with running the state's domestic violence shelters have lost about \$200,000 each. For most, that amounts to more than 40 percent of their anticipated annual financing, although agencies have received money for other shelter services from the federal stimulus package and the state's emergency management agency.

Erik Sternad, the executive director of Interface Children Family Services in Ventura County, near Los Angeles, said his organization had initially believed that it would lose all five of its transitional shelters — usually multibedroom homes in suburban areas — where about three dozen women and children could live for up to 18 months. In the end, one was sold, one was transformed into youth services, and the final three were eventually saved by private donations. But of those, two have money assured only through June 30, the end of the fiscal year.

“We know that this money is going to run out about nine months from now,” Mr. Sternad said.

The pain has been most acute in remote areas. The Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Coalition in Grass Valley, northeast of Sacramento, is the only such facility in that area. The coalition closed its 12-bed shelter, leaving five families in the lurch.

Niko Johnson, the coalition's executive director, said her staff managed to find places for those families to stay, but has since had to turn away 14 women with 8 children.

“We had to give a voucher for a motel,” she said. “When women get to that point and are ready to make a change, it's hard to say we can give you three nights in a motel. They ask, ‘What next?’ ”

At the same time, Ms. Else, of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, said the impact of a sour economy, including job losses and foreclosures, added to the need for services.

“I don't know that it causes or creates domestic violence,” she said of the recession. “But what happens is that if there is domestic violence happening at home, it exacerbates it.”

The cutbacks come as the movement to fight domestic violence marked the 15th anniversary of passage of both the federal Violence Against Women Act, which established programs and penalties in cases of abuse against women, and California's Battered Women Protection Act, which established financing for the state's shelter system. There have been some signs of help. In August, shortly after the California cuts were announced, the Department of Justice awarded about \$2.9 million to six transitional housing programs in California, primarily in rural counties. In the meantime, many shelters are finding ways to cope.

Mari Alaniz, director the Riley Center, which is run by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, said that combining the center's emergency services and longer-term transitional program in one building has meant less privacy, with as many as six beds to a room. Still, she said, “better to have six in a room than not to have a shelter.”

That sentiment is echoed by a 41-year-old woman who was there for months last year when her ex-husband threatened to hurt her two younger children.

“When he was doing stuff to me, I could take it,” said the woman, whose name is being withheld to avoid disclosing her location. “But when I saw it was happening to them, I reacted like a lion. And eventually I

was a lion, and I left the situation.”

The woman has since moved into her own home with two of her children.

She said she had lived in fear of beatings and other kinds of abuse from her ex-husband for more than two decades, but had noticed a change in herself of late.

“Now that I have my own home, it might sound dumb, but I can get up when I want and do what I want, and I think the kids feel the same way,” she said. “I ain’t scared no more.”

Erik Eckholm contributed reporting from Fresno, Calif.

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