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[News](#) | October 30, 2009

New funding for domestic violence victims elicits sighs of relief

Marty Olmstead | Special to The Sun

When Governor Schwarz-enegger vetoed millions of dollars in funding for social services at the end of July, some of Sonoma's most vulnerable citizens bore the brunt of the fall-out. Programs that help AIDS patients, the elderly, the blind and victims of domestic abuse across the county were forced to cut staff and/or curtail services in order to survive. Six of the state's 94 shelters for the victims of domestic violence had to close.

The Sonoma YWCA, the major provider of domestic violence services in the county, lost \$207,222 – nearly half its budget – in funding that for years had been in place through the California Department of Public Health's Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health Program. As a result, the nonprofit had to lay-off staff and struggle to continue operating the county's only confidential safe-house location, a vital link in the chain of services which help protect victims and their children.

Earlier this month – which happens to be Domestic Violence Awareness Month – Schwarzenegger signed SB X313 which will provide \$16.3 million, from a special gas fund, to help restore some of these services throughout the state. It took the efforts of a statewide coalition, the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, to get the unusual emergency legislation passed in only three months, according to Denise Frey, executive director of the YWCA Sonoma County, a partner in the coalition.

Frey said that signing the emergency bill was a step in the right direction, but the work to secure ongoing funding for shelters has just begun. "We hope this is a step toward renewing the state's long-term support for victims of domestic violence and their children," she said. "This is not simply a social problem; it's a public safety issue."

Sonoma law-enforcement agencies receive more than 4,000 reports of domestic abuse every year, though insiders estimate many more cases go unreported.

Not only is the restored funding a stop-gap measure, but the money won't be available until January. The YWCA is to receive \$150,000 which will definitely come with strings attached.

"It's almost a case of being grateful for what you wish for," said Frey. "We are thrilled that we will be receiving funds, but it presents challenges in that we have only six months to spend it and there is no assurance of more.

"Our priority has to be the safe house," she said. "We will also be replacing some of the positions that were laid off and we hope to restore some funding" to the Sonoma Valley domestic violence advocate position.

Before the drastic funding cuts, the YWCA had relied on state money to provide law-enforcement advocates who work with Sonoma County police and sheriff departments to aid victims of domestic violence.

Here in the Valley, where 95 domestic violence cases were reported between January and mid-October, funding dried up for the City of Sonoma Police Department's YWCA advocate, a position that had been filled by Rebecca Elmer. When she left in August, Police Chief Bret Sackett said he realized the Valley was losing an important position.

Domestic abuse is a "traumatic event," he said earlier this week. "The advocates help the victim get through it." Sackett described the process, "When a victim calls the police to report an incident involving domestic violence, we send out an investigator to take appropriate action," depending on whether the incident is an argument or something worse.

The Sonoma Police Department officer writes up a Domestic Violence-Related Incident report and, if it is a criminal incident, makes an arrest. Copies of these reports are sent to the YWCA, which determines the necessary next step. An advocate then gets in touch with the victim and helps her or him – if it is a rare case of a male victim – through the criminal justice system right up to the court date. At that time, a representative from the county district attorney's department of Victim Assistance takes over the advocacy role.

Since the local advocate position has been vacant, the City of Sonoma Police Department has been submitting these reports to the county sheriff's department, which still has two advocates who can supply limited services.

"We've been limping by," said Sackett, who has been looking for alternative sources of revenue and on Oct. 7 convinced the city council to fund a part-time advocate position at least through the current fiscal cycle, which ends June 30, 2010. With the help of the YWCA, he has also received commitments from private donors and notes that several local service groups seem also seem interested in pitching in. Sackett hopes to rehire Rebecca Elmer early next month. "She did a tremendous amount of work, helping victims, making contacts and networking," he said.

In the short term, Sackett knows the emergency legislation restoring funding for domestic violence programs makes a top priority of getting the shelter fully staffed and operational, and supporting other programs around the county.

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