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Friend to Friend Helps Domestic Violence Victims

BY FLORENCE GILKESON: SENIOR WRITER

Compassionate friends are available around the clock at Friend to Friend, the nonprofit agency that provides service to victims of domestic violence.

The 24-hour crisis center offers counseling, shelter, education and other services to victims and family members affected by any kind of domestic violence, from beatings to sexual assault to child molestation.

"We have no idea how many people are alive today because they had a safe place to go in a time of crisis," said Jackie Thamm, executive director of Friend to Friend.

In July, Friend to Friend will celebrate its 20th year serving Moore County.

"We're not the

kind of people who can turn people away," Thamm said. "When there is need present, we accept them, because we know it's a life or death situation. We want to maintain our services. Otherwise, people would have no place to go."

During the 2007 calendar year, Friend to Friend accommodated 120 individuals, including children, in the shelter and provided a total of 2,345 days of care. In addition, the staff helped with 228 restraining orders and accompanied 356 people to court.

The shelter (at an undisclosed site) has a capacity of 18 individuals or five families, but at one time it accommodated 21 people. The average daily occupancy is seven, including adults and children. On the day of this interview, the shelter had nine occupants.

Between crisis calls and counseling sessions, the staff made 1,033 contacts with individuals and families involved in domestic violence situations or victims of sexual assault.

Friend to Friend also provides community education. Thamm saw as many as 3,772 students and 260 teachers last year in an effort to educate young people

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on this difficult and sensitive subject. The idea is to halt the spread of such violence at as early an age as possible.

Benefit Planned

All of this work takes money, but the agency's \$333,000 budget for the 2007-2008 fiscal year is not easily obtained.

Thamm must work continuously to secure grants from foundations as well as grants from governments and gifts from individuals.

And she is especially pleased that a community group is staging a local performance of Eve Ensler's Obie-award-winning play "The Vagina Monologues" as a fundraiser for Friend to Friend.

The provocative play, which has been translated into 22 languages, will be performed Saturday, March 15, in Owens Auditorium on the Sandhills Community College campus. Two performances are planned, a 2 p.m. matinee and a 7 p.m. showing. It is open to the public.

In some ways, the presentation is ironic, because not all of the Friend to Friend clients are women.

Thamm said that the nonprofit reaches a number of male clients, although the greatest number is women. Men victims are usually provided shelter in an area motel and are never admitted to the shelter, which is set aside solely for women and children.

In the final six months of 2007, Friend to Friend worked with 17 male clients.

Thamm said most men fare very well on their own at a motel, for they typically have some resources of their own and are not usually accompanied by children. She emphasized that Friend to Friend does not discriminate against a victim of domestic violence, and such factors as gender, race, ethnicity and income are no barrier against service.

In fact, she and her staff sometimes offer services to the abuser as well as the victim.

"We offer services to both," she said. "The abuser is often a victim too."

Constant Search for Funding

Abusers frequently come from homes in which domestic violence was the normal atmosphere, and they know no other way of dealing with the family situation, she said.

That's the reason why emphasis is placed on protecting children as soon as possible from witnessing such violence. In some places it is a crime for anyone to commit an act of violence in the presence of a minor child.

The courts frequently refer abusers to a program known as Recovery Associates, which provides counseling to men and women who commit acts of violence on family members.

"We concentrate on children, because there is a high probability of a return to violent behavior in adulthood if they are not educated about appropriate relations with other people," Thamm says.

The dilemma right now is a downslide in donations from individuals and organizations, apparently because of the sluggish economy. Making matters

worse, a slow economy often means an increase in clientele.

"A slow economy doesn't cause violence, but it certainly exacerbates the situation," she says.

Domestic violence can become more frequent with loss of jobs and reductions in income leading to frustration, drinking and gambling.

Thamm spends much of her time filling out applications for grants from local, state and federal governments and from nonprofit foundations and searching for new sources of financing. Grants from government sources are usually available on a regular basis, especially if there is no serious budget crunch.

But many of the private foundations offer grants on a highly competitive basis, and it is important to fill out the application "just right" to draw down the money. Thamm said some of the larger national foundations pay little attention to smaller agencies, such as Friend to Friend, because they concentrate on agencies that reach the largest populations.

Friend to Friend has been a United Way member since 1990.

However, Friend to Friend lucked up last year when it secured an additional \$10,000 from one source because it ranked among the five top such agencies in North Carolina.

Friend to Friend makes a small profit from a shop it operates on McNeill Street in Carthage, where donations of clothing and other items may be purchased at reduced prices. Most of the buyers are clients, but the shop is open to the public. Thamm said the shop is too small to make much money, but it does meet overhead.

Maintaining Relations

The nonprofit remains in close contact with every law-enforcement agency and all other agencies and institutions that offer services of value to clients. The staff stays in touch with the Southern Pines and Pinehurst police departments, which serve the largest municipalities in the county, and the Sheriff's Department.

Other resources include the district attorney and her staff, the schools, Sandhills Mental Health Center, the departments of health and social services, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Drug-Free Moore.

"It keeps us really busy maintaining these relations," Thamm said.

One staffer is trained as a court advocate, another as a client service manager, and others provide a variety of specialized services. One former client now helps out as a volunteer, and other clients work behind the scenes.

Thamm said the center has had so many volunteers, both concerned people and former clients, that she has no idea how many people have given time, talent and energy to the cause of helping families in crisis.

Friend to Friend has a staff of nine full-time personnel and five part-time workers, but it is difficult to keep employees for long periods because the agency is not sufficiently funded to offer many benefits, such as health insurance. Thamm said she is looking into this issue and hopes the agency can correct this problem later in the year.

The center continues to need money to maintain services and operations, but Thamm sees no end to its presence in the community. It remains clear that

people from all walks of life are at times in need of counseling and service for domestic violence situations and, most of all, the comfort of a peaceful haven.

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