

Grant Update

A Summary of Grant Activity

Governor's Crime Commission

NC Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Families First, Inc.: Domestic Violence Victim Advocate

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence often slip under the radar of public awareness. Unless a case becomes newsworthy because of a fatal or near-fatal assault, most people are unaware of the extent of the problem. Add to this the fact that approximately 40 percent¹ of incidents of domestic or intimate partner violence go unreported and the problem takes on greater significance. In 2010, 73 domestic violence homicides occurred in North Carolina and 66,320 individuals, both female and male, sought services, shelter or some type of support because of domestic violence. Between 1997 and 2010 in Columbus County 11 victims died as a result of domestic violence. In one year alone (2009-2010), 97 adults and 128 youth under the age of 17 were housed in shelters and 853 domestic violence clients received other support services in Columbus and Bladen counties.²

The Problem

Despite the lack of awareness of the extent of domestic and intimate partner violence, one program in Columbus and Bladen counties provides services to victims in this area. In many cases, they work quietly to assist victims in escaping violent domestic situations by providing them with the shelter, support and counseling needed to recover from the trauma of domestic violence or sexual assault and helping families build new lives without the threat of violence. Families First, Inc. is the only program in these counties available to assist victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. The goals of the program are to reduce the effects of domestic violence by assisting and empowering victims and their children. Because the area is rural, one of the key objectives focuses on reducing the isolation of victims by reaching out to remote rural communities to provide shelter, support and counseling. Additional aims focus on increasing the number of victims placed in safe homes and expanding the services available to underserved victims in the area, including people of color and rural residents.

The Grant

In 2010, Families First applied for a grant to fund a Domestic Violence Victim Advocate for Columbus and Bladen counties. The responsibilities of the advocate include providing the majority of services to victims of domestic and intimate partner violence in area. Families First, Inc. is the only agency in Columbus and Bladen counties that provides services specifically for victims of domestic or intimate partner violence and their children. The agency's shelter, which can house up to 17, has been at capacity for the past year. A conference room has been repurposed to provide additional space for victims and their children. In the past 12 months, the average length of stay has increased from eight days to 28 days. When possible, families are referred to agencies in other areas, but referrals are not always available in this rural part of the state. The downturn in the economy has



Executive Director Vickie Pait (standing) and Greta Sellers, the domestic violence victim advocate, work with a client at Families First, Inc.



Greta Sellers works with 2nd grade students in the "Hands are not for Hitting" anti-violence program. The program is presented to all 2nd graders in each primary school in Bladen and Columbus counties and reaches approximately 700 students.

Staff from Lowe's Hardware contribute time and materials to the shelter; repainting the interior; renovating the outside play space for children and donating a television, heater and stove to the shelter.



hit the area especially hard and Families First has experienced a significant increase in the number of victims seeking assistance and shelter in recent months.

Greta Sellers was hired to serve as the Domestic Violence Victim Advocate for Families First. Her duties involve coordinating the criminal justice assistance program, working closely with victims and their families to provide the support and services they need. While she concentrates on assisting victims in filing Domestic Violence Protective Orders, she also reviews options available to victims and makes sure they know the legal differences between protective orders and criminal orders. When victims are scheduled to go to court, she explains the processes and procedures they should expect and goes with them to provide both physical and mental support. She also works with the district attorney's office, area law enforcement agencies and magistrates as an advocate for victims. Due to the rapport she has developed with court personnel, they keep her up-to-date on the status of protective orders and other critical information.

Greta focuses on the victims of domestic violence and serves as their advocate. Families First, Inc. Executive Director Vickie Pait stated that Greta was thorough and took the time necessary to make victims comfortable and often goes the extra mile in the interests of her clients. In one case, when the victim was too badly injured from a domestic assault to come into the office, she went to the victim's location to help her process a protective order. Vickie describes her support for victims as 'unconditional.' She guides them through the process of obtaining protective orders and court procedures, but also lets those who choose not to proceed with their cases know that they still have someone they can turn to later. Since starting work with the agency, Greta has completed the certification program offered by the North Carolina Victims' Services Academy and is now a certified Victim Service Practitioner.

In her role as the Domestic Violence Victim Advocate, Greta works closely with the local departments of social services, health departments, Columbus Regional Healthcare, private physicians, law enforcement agencies, county and city schools, the district attorneys' offices and area non-profit organizations to provide legal services, housing and other assistance to victims of domestic violence in both Columbus and Bladen counties. There is an effort underway to obtain a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner for the local hospital to provide additional support for victims of sexual assault.

Community Involvement

Families First operates two thrift stores in Whiteville and Tabor City, which have provided more than \$42,000 in additional funds to help sustain their program. Items from the resale stores have also been used to provide clothing, furniture and related items to others in the area, including families who have lost their homes to fire or natural disasters and children in need. The stores also serve as an outreach location for the program and have office space set aside so staff members can meet with victims privately. They work with other non-profit agencies, including Dream House and the Help Mission to coordinate services, housing and necessities for victims of domestic/intimate partner violence. Families First has also promoted awareness of teen dating violence and is initiating a Teen Empowerment Program to educate teens and their parents on dating violence, sexual assault and cybercrime.

Grant Update: Families First, Inc.: Domestic Violence Victim Advocate

A “Breaking the Silence” rally was held in October 2010. The purpose of the rally was to increase awareness of domestic violence, to remember those who were victims of domestic violence and to honor people in the community who have volunteered their support and assistance to Families First. Participants — and their dogs — took part in a walk through Whiteville as part of PAWS (National Pets and Women’s Shelter) Day to raise additional funds for the program and to share information on domestic violence and services available. PAWS is the American Humane Association’s program that works with domestic violence shelters to provide onsite housing for the pets of victims and their families, allowing them to keep their pets safe.



Above, participants line up for the PAWS Day walk, while a canine supporter waits for the chance to hit the streets.

Accomplishments

Between October 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011, Families First, Inc. served 804 victims of domestic violence. Sixteen of the women who were housed in the shelter have since moved into safe homes. Greta has provided outreach services to clients, supported them through the court process and has worked with court personnel to stay up to date on the status of Domestic Violence Protective Orders filed in both counties. Families First uses volunteers to staff summer programs for children who are affected by domestic violence and to provide support services to these children. This is critical, since there is not a Child Advocacy Council established in the area.



Summary

With recent budget cuts, the funding of domestic and intimate partner violence programs supported through area district attorney’s offices has not been renewed. This places additional pressure on organizations such as Families First, Inc. and the Domestic Violence Victim Advocate to fill the gap in services. While volunteers are being trained to provide support and services to victims of domestic violence in Columbus and Bladen counties, the resources available to victims and the agencies that help them in rural counties will be stretched much thinner. Programs such as Families First, Inc. and the Domestic Violence Victim Advocate will become increasingly important to provide victim’s services that governmental agencies are no longer able to provide.

Notes

- 1/ Durose, M.R., Harlow, C.W., Langan, P.A., Motivans, M., Rantala, R.R., Smith, E. L. (2005). Family Violence Statistics. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- 2/ N.C. Department of Administration, Council for Women. Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Statistics, Retrieved April 25, 2011 from <http://www.nccfwdvc.com/stats.htm>

At the Columbus County Fair, Families First displayed a table set with different place settings in memory of the 11 victims who died as a result of domestic violence in Columbus County since 1997. Each place setting carries a place card with the name and date of death of each victim, including the individual who was responsible for the death and their relationship to the victim. It is a stark reminder of the serious reality of domestic violence.



Families First, Inc.: Domestic Violence Victim Advocate

GRANT SUMMARY

Area Served: Bladen and Columbus Counties

Implementing Agency: Families First, Inc.

Project Director: Vickie Pait, Executive Director

Funding: \$43,000

Overview: Families First provides services and shelter to both adult and child victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in Bladen and Columbus counties.

Objectives: To increase the number of victims accessing services other than shelter, including support groups, counseling and advocacy.

To reduce the isolation experienced by victims of domestic violence by providing shelter, court advocacy, support groups and counseling.

To increase the number of victims moving into safe homes in Columbus and Bladen counties.

Accomplishments: Between October 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011, Families First, Inc. has served 804 domestic violence victims and their families.

Short and long-term housing was offered to 142 victims.

The Domestic Violence Victim Advocate provided criminal justice support and advocacy to 628 victims at various stages of the criminal justice process.

The advocate assisted 620 clients with emergency legal advocacy, including filing temporary restraining orders, injunctions and other protective orders.

The advocate also helped victims with personal advocacy in 1,092 cases, including securing rights, remedies and services from other agencies, finding emergency financial assistance and intervening with employers, creditors and others on behalf of the victim. The advocate also conducted 912 follow-up contacts with victims.

Information and referral services were provided to 1,917 victims through personal contact to identify services and support networks for victims.

In-person crisis intervention, including emotional support, guidance and counseling was provided to 811 clients.

The agency coordinated group treatment for 86 clients, assisted three in filing compensation claims, helped 36 with emergency financial assistance and provided assistance to 42 clients through Victims of Crime Act services.

The advocate documented 1,248 telephone contacts with victims to make them aware of services and support that were available.