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## Sonoma County's Family Justice Center opens in Santa Rosa

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A state-of-the-art sanctuary for the battered and abused lies behind mirrored glass doors at the new Family Justice Center of Sonoma County in Santa Rosa.

A receptionist buzzes in single mothers, the elderly and other vulnerable people to a safe haven where they can get protective orders, file police reports or talk to advocates about temporary housing and legal assistance.

It's a one-stop shop to help victims of family violence navigate the otherwise daunting legal system.

Since opening its doors in late August, the Mendocino Avenue center has been quietly gaining in popularity, serving more than 85 people in the first month, said Executive Director Laura Colgate.

"We had been sort of flying under the radar," said Colgate, a former Agilent project manager who helped plan the center before she was hired to run it. "Now, I imagine it will start going crazy."

The public is invited to the grand opening from noon to 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 12.

The two-story, county-owned building near the Sheriff's Office was the result of about four years of planning led by former District Attorney Stephan Passalacqua.

A study determined victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and crimes such as stalking and elder financial fraud could be required to visit two dozen different agencies if they wanted to use public services available to them.

Since many victims can lack transportation, be financially strapped or be pursued by an abuser, advocates determined it would be best to put all the assistance for them under one roof.

The county bought and renovated a former office building with grants and donations of about \$6 million and invited more than a dozen victim advocates from organizations like Catholic Charities, the Council on Aging, the YWCA and the Inter-tribal Council.

The center is staffed by police and district attorney employees, an immigration adviser, an advocate for the deaf and a civil attorney who provides advice about harassment and getting restraining orders.

Colgate, a Tomales-area farmer's daughter and Valley of the Moon Children's Center board president, was hired this summer.



JOHN BURGESS/ PD

Laura Colgate, the executive director of the Family Justice Center, stands outside their new center on Mendocino Ave. in Santa Rosa.

Sheila Miller, a Legal Aid lawyer assigned to the Family Justice Center, said she's been swamped by people as they become aware of all the center has to offer.

"We've been very busy," she said. "It seems like every person walking in here is looking for a restraining order."

Down the hall, Norma Ford, an elder advocate with the Council on Aging, said word appears to be spreading among people over 60 who are victims of abuse.

"Here, we come to the victim," Ford said. "They aren't lost anymore."

Victims are either referred or walk in off the street, get assessed for their needs and begin receiving services immediately. The facility has a playroom for children, computers that victims may use to polish a résumé or look for a job and a wardrobe of job-hunting clothes.

Battered women with children make up the bulk of the people served by the center.

Efforts were made to furnish it in a "homey" way with pieces donated from area businesses.

A security system ensures people are safe from angry husbands or boyfriends, staff members said.

A rainbow-colored sign on the front desk says "Safe Zone."

"This place is supposed to be very welcoming," said intake coordinator Jacque Reid. "They must feel supported."

Already, the center is gaining attention from other counties that are interested in building their own, Colgate said.

At a recent advocates meeting in San Diego, which had the state's first family justice center, the new Santa Rosa facility was recognized as among the best in the nation, she said.

But she's not out to win accolades. Her mission is to create a safer community while being a force for healing and change, Colgate said.

"My goal is to work myself out of a job," Colgate said. "I think we would be better off if we could stop the cycle of violence."

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