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Arizona's Urban Sprawl Stretches Shelter System

By Pamela Burke, WeNews Correspondent

As urban sprawl pushes Phoenix and Tucson into previously rural counties, domestic violence shelters lag behind. Advocates say more funding is desperately needed. Second in "Dangerous Trends, Innovative Responses" series.



Christy Moore

APACHE JUNCTION, Ariz. (WOMENSENEWS) – The home she lives in has six security cameras, windows that don't open and a panic button in each of the bathrooms.

If that button is pushed, the police are set to respond within three to seven minutes, sending at least two armed officers. Brenda has a 7 p.m. curfew during the week unless she notifies the house of a change in her schedule.

The one 12-by-18-foot room she shares with her three children – ages 7, 3 and 1 – is the only personal space they have in this domestic violence shelter located in a once rural but rapidly growing area 35 miles west of Phoenix.

It's not perfect. Brenda, who is 28, cries as she talks about her children spending their birthdays there this year. But still, she sees her current situation as a vast improvement. "They don't see marks on me now and they'll never be able to see anything like that again."

"I feel so safe here," she adds. "I have someone to make sure I achieve my goals. If I didn't have this help, I probably would still be married and very scared."

Brenda, whose last name has been withheld to protect her identity, filed for divorce this past year after she says she discovered her husband had been spending \$50 a day on a methamphetamine habit. His behavior had become erratic and he became violent, punching out both her eyes in front of her daughter, yanking out her hair and pulling the phone lines. He went to trial and denied everything.

“He told the judge that I had makeup on and claimed he didn’t do anything to me,” Brenda remembers. “He got three and a half years supervised probation; anger management training and they let him go with no jail time.”

Lucky to Find Shelter

Brenda is lucky to find space at this 16-bed shelter in Apache Junction, operated by the Community Alliance Against Family Abuse, the only service provider for victims of domestic violence in northern Pinal County, which is about the same size as Connecticut.

Phoenix and Tucson are sprawling into previously rural areas like Apache Junction and social services, including domestic violence shelters, are trying to catch up with the demand. There are now 35 residential shelters in the state providing over 800 beds for victims every night and many say that’s not enough.

“The culture in some of these communities doesn’t think it’s necessarily wrong to beat your wife but that’s slowly beginning to change,” says Bill Ludeke, executive director of United Way of Pinal County, an organization that gives funding to the shelter for prevention programs.

Unlike many shelters the Community Alliance sets no limits on the amount of time spent there as long as the clients are progressing toward goals and participating in the program.

The shelter offers parenting classes, individual counseling, support groups, resume writing and some educational instruction. Last year women and children spent a total of 2,553 bed nights there with an average stay of 120 days.

Moore hopes that the Community Alliance can eventually construct two more facilities on the property of their current shelter. She would also like to build transitional housing – possibly duplexes – in the community.

Transitional Housing Needs

Transitional housing provides women a place to live independently, but with some rent subsidy and ongoing support services. If this area had transitional housing, Brenda – who has been in the shelter since April and has a personal goal to find housing by the holidays – would be a prime candidate.

The state has given funding to the Community Alliance to conduct research and land studies about future transitional housing.

But there’s no state funding available for building additional facilities – either shelters or transitional housing – at this time because the allocated state monies are for operational purposes only and not for capital expenses.

The shelter, with an annual operating budget of about \$500,000, obtains about 80 percent of its funding from state and federal sources, says Director of Services Heidi Haeder-Heild, but is looking into ways to obtain private money and grants so that it can be more self-sufficient.

“There is a huge need for additional shelter space in this county,” says Christy Moore, executive director of the Community Alliance. “We went from 8 beds to 16 last year with our new shelter, but we didn’t know we’d be at 90 percent capacity within two weeks.”

In 2003 Governor Janet Napolitano appointed 57 members to her Commission to Prevent Violence Against Women to unite statewide efforts to prevent and end the violence, to serve as a clearinghouse and to develop recommendations for appropriate policy and legislation.

Her statewide plan to combat domestic and sexual violence is ongoing and being updated.

Governor’s Efforts Brought Funding

Last year, at a time when many states were not doling out money for domestic violence needs, Moore says Napolitano helped get \$1.5 million allocated to service providers throughout the state, which is how the Community Alliance managed to add eight emergency beds to its facility.

But while professional advocates for domestic-violence prevention consider the governor an ally, they say far more money is needed.

“This year organizations got \$2.8 million when there were a number of budget cuts,” says Moore. “It’s primarily for beds and not shelters. This is definitely better than nothing but so much more is needed.” (Last week Moore announced that she will be leaving the Community Alliance shortly to assume the position of executive director of the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a statewide nonprofit alliance of representatives from domestic violence programs, individuals and groups based in Phoenix.)

In 2004, the Governor’s State Plan on Domestic and Sexual Violence reported over 100 domestic violence-related homicides in Arizona during the previous year. In “Breaking the Cycle,” a resource book developed to assist victims and service providers, Napolitano wrote that domestic violence was the No. 1 call for service among state law-enforcement agencies and that Arizona had the second highest domestic violence murder rate in the country.

Napolitano is up for re-election in November. A Rasmussen Reports poll conducted on Sept. 18 showed Napolitano leading her challenger, Len Munsil, with 56 percent support of those polled to his 38 percent.

Brenda was recently awarded the Community Alliance's first education scholarship. Funded by a founder of the group, it included free tuition, books and registration fees for a semester at Central Arizona College. Her goal is to become a certified nursing assistant and to be able to support her family now that the divorce from her husband is final.

"I want to give my kids the best life that I can," she says, "and a yard for them to play in."

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For more information:

"Dangerous Trends, Innovative Responses":
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2906/>

Mary Kay Ash Charitable Foundation, Domestic Violence Resources:
<http://www.mkacf.org/Violence/ResourcesForEndingViolence.html>

Community Alliance Against Family Abuse: <http://www.caafaaz.org>

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