

Domestic violence calls up in Santa Cruz

Domestic Violence

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SANTA CRUZ — Domestic violence calls have risen by a third in Santa Cruz this year in what one women's advocate calls a huge social problem.

Coupled with the economic downturn, local groups helping women in need are feeling the crunch.

Meanwhile, some advocates fear a bill introduced in the House of Representatives giving local police clear power to enforce immigration laws could quell the reporting of abuse by nonlegal residents.

Fear of deportation and the use of that fear by abusers is already a barrier to immigrant women getting

help, said Jennifer Rose, director of domestic violence programs at Walnut Avenue Women's Center.

The center has served twice as many women as they did last year. This year they started two groups serving Spanish speakers.

Domestic violence calls are up in Santa Cruz by a third compared to last year, police report and county emergency dispatchers report there were 161 such calls from Oct. 1-15 last year and 180 during that period this year.

Studies have shown a correlation between economic stress and domestic violence, Rose said. She and others suspect more women are reporting domestic violence, not experiencing it for the first time.

Some are telling of abuse for the first time while at the center for food or other assistance.

"Our advocates are saying that many of these women have been victims for a long time," said Dee O'Brien, the center's executive director.

The center received two large grants about five years ago and their programs have grown tremendously, O'Brien said. The funding also allowed them to hire bilingual advocates and begin outreach efforts in Beach Flats, lower Ocean Street and other heavily Latino areas.

An unidentified 40-year-old moth-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The Walnut Avenue Women's Center's Cynara Moraes and Karen McCabe monitor domestic violence in Santa Cruz.

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er of two girls who attends the Spanish group, smiles confidently at a visitor and readily agrees to share her story. But after the first question, the reminder of what brought her there, causes her chin quivers as she tries to hold back tears.

She was with an abusive, drug-using husband for 15 years, beginning when she was 18, after coming to the United States from Mexico at age 15. She was raped in Santa Cruz after she left her husband and said her family was violent and abusive too. Her father worked in the fields.

She not only gets food and clothing at the center, she gets parenting advice and self-respect, she says.

"They helped raise my self-esteem as a woman," she said. She sweeps her hand across the hardwood floor, over her white Nikes.

"I felt way at the bottom, like I didn't matter. But I can talk here. It makes me feel that I can keep fighting for my kids, for my husband."

Her counselor, Cynara Moraes, said that domestic violence cuts across all boundaries, it can be particularly difficult to overcome for Latinas, especially immigrants, due to isolation from language and other barriers, including a family-dominated culture.

Celia Organista of the recently

merged Women's Crisis Support Defensa de Mujeres, said Defensa has provided assistance to Spanish speakers in Watsonville since opening in 1990 and that Women's Crisis Support, which opened 27 years ago, has been doing so since the 1980s.

"We're basically dealing with a population (Spanish speakers) that is a second thought," she said. "But I don't think domestic violence has increased. I think domestic violence is coming out of the closet."

"We need to be constantly on top of it and remind people what is available to them, what their rights are. That goes to the community at large — call if you hear someone screaming next door."

The group has seen a steady increase in clients, Organista said, and more women taking advantage of restraining orders and other legal help.

Rose said Walnut Avenue advocates will have to get creative with their larger caseloads. The 12-year-old center has a budget of \$1.3 million, \$400,000 of which is dedicated to domestic violence work; 90 percent of the funding comes from government sources.

Call Walnut Avenue Women's Center 426-3062 or Women's Crisis Support Defensa de Mujeres at 425-4030 in Santa Cruz or 722-4532 in Watsonville. The 24-hour hotline numbers are 685-3737 or (866) 269-2559.

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