

# Crisis center closes after four resign

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The abrupt resignation of four employees of the Watsonville office of Women's Crisis Support forced the closure of the office yesterday, two weeks before it was scheduled to go out of operation.

The four employees, including Marcia Rincon, program coordinator at the Watsonville office, quit in protest of the decision by the county organization to close the Watsonville office on May 1 because of a lack of funding. Calls to the Watsonville office are being forwarded to the Santa Cruz office.

Women's Crisis Support Executive Director Nora Hochman said she did not expect the Sudden Street office to reopen.

The resignations followed on the heels of a press conference Monday at which members of a "multicultural advisory committee" had protested the agency's treatment of Latino women. Charges of mismanagement, poor planning and "tokenism" were leveled against agency administrators and board members.

Tuesday, another of the women resigning — Elsa Granados, a shelter advocate and sexual-assault-program coordinator who worked mainly in Santa Cruz — read a statement accusing the agency's board of racism.

"The racism that exists," the statement read in part, "has created an atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity, which has hindered our ability to provide quality services to battered women, especially in the Latino community."

Also resigning were Maria Perez, a shelter advocate and program assistant in Watsonville, and Karmen Kohl, Santa Cruz shelter advocate.

The Watsonville office opened in 1981 and operated 37½ hours weekly before yesterday's closure. Women working with Women's Crisis Support in Watsonville said an expansion, rather than a retraction, of services is needed.

Women's Crisis Support is in its 11th year of helping women in Santa Cruz County deal with the issues of domestic violence, drug addiction and sexual assault. The agency's main office is at 1025 Center St. in Santa Cruz, but it also offers outreach services and operates a crisis hotline and a "secret shelter" where women and children can find refuge.

Hochman said she was saddened that the women felt they had no alternative but to resign. They were valuable and talented employees who were much-appreciated by their clients, she said.

"I'm impressed with the courage that it took to lay their jobs on the line for deeply held beliefs and convictions," Hochman said.

Hochman called the resignations "a disabling move for the agency."

Women's Crisis Support must now recruit an outreach worker who would share office space 30 hours a week — rather than a previously suggested six hours — with Legal Aid in Watsonville, Hochman said.

The original plan was to open that office when the Sudden Street office closed, Hochman said. Since the outreach position is a highly specialized one, however, Hochman said, it is therefore difficult to fill, so the new office might not be in operation as soon as hoped.

Asked about the charges of racism, Hochman said it's a priority with her to hire Latino women. Six of 20 Women's Crisis Support employees were Latino women before Tuesday's resignations, although none held a management position, she said.

"That's where we fall down," she said.

She'd like to fill management positions with Latino women, Hochman said, but the structure was already in place when she took over as executive director in June.

"I can't very well fire people because of that, you know," she said. "I inherited what I inherited."

Granados said that although the closure of the Sudden Street office has become a rallying point for Latino women, the alleged racism within the agency is perceived as broader than that issue.

She pointed out that requests for an outreach worker in Beach Flats went unanswered for years, but when women in the San Lorenzo Valley expressed the need for services, their requests were answered with a plan to place an outreach worker there.

However, Hochman said that plan is only under consideration. The need for Women's Crisis Support services is greater throughout the county than the agency has resources to give, she said, but women's groups are somehow expected to manage on limited funding.

"It's kind of like a throwback to stretching the grocery money," she said. "You know, we can come up with some wonderful casseroles."

Although Women's Crisis Support lacks the funding to provide Watsonville with expanded services, Hochman said, she wants to get beyond the issue of the Sudden Street office and talk things out with the Latino community.