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Domestic Violence

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Sentinel

# It's A Place To Go For Abused Women

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One woman left home after her husband put out a lighted cigarette on her chest.

Another finally escaped after her husband repeatedly locked her and her children inside their home while he went to work.

Until a few months ago, these women had nowhere to turn.

But things are changing, according to a young, dark-haired woman named Kayla Starr. She is part of a new program designed to provide shelter to women who are victims of violence in their own homes.

It is a place where a woman can go to stay for one night, or six weeks. It is a place where she will find support and counseling.

But most of all, it is a place where she will be safe from her husband and can have time to make decisions, according to Starr, who is one of the staff members at the shelter program.

Called Mariposa House, the location of the shelter is a jealously guarded secret — and not because the project is some clandestine operation.

Similar shelters in other areas have had instances of violent husbands injuring staff members as they search for their wives. Sometimes the women themselves are injured, said Starr.

"Two women were killed because they were found near a shelter in San Francisco," she said. But, so far, there have been no violent confrontations at the local facility.

What would happen if an irate husband did happen to find the shelter's location and arrive there to confront his wife?

"We'd call the police," said Starr.

The shelter, whose location is not even revealed to police, is a modern, clean-looking home.

Currently, it houses two women and their combination of three children. Both of those women at the shelter have been beaten repeatedly and "had to be hospitalized with concussions, cuts and broken limbs," said Starr. They went to the shelter to get away from the situation they were in, and because there was nowhere else to turn.

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Women going to Mariposa House are usually referred there by the Women's Crisis Support Center on Capitola Road.

The women are screened to find out if they are victims of violence and have no other alternatives, said Starr.

Then, a staff member will pick them up in a neutral location and drive them to the shelter where the first thing they receive is a big dose of emotional support, said Starr. They are given counseling if they want it, protection, transportation for job hunting and house searching, clothing, child care, medical assistance and legal help.

They can stay up to six weeks. Some do. Others simply stay for one night and move along somewhere else.

They are the victims of what Starr called "the most frequently committed violent crime in the nation according to the FBI."

It is a crime that has its roots in a history of a man's dominance over his wife, said Starr. In the past, it has traditionally be acceptable for a man to discipline his wife, said Starr.

"Did you know there is a law in Pennsylvania right now which prohibits a husband from being allowed to beat his wife after 10 p.m. and on Sundays?" she asked.

Another law somewhere in the United States sets out the width of a switch that could be used for beating one's wife, she said.

The concept of wife beating has to change, said Starr. The shelter is just one outgrowth of the rapidly increasing knowledge about marital abuse.

It is staffed by four federally-funded CETA workers and 20 volunteers. A special state grant created by legislation last year funds about one-third of the costs.

Starr said the shelter needs both financial and volunteer support from the community. Right now, they are in need of several bunk beds for the shelter.

"Women who come to the shelter feel really grateful . . . they feel cut off and helpless," said Starr.

Anyone needing the shelter's services can contact the Women's Crisis Support Center or the shelter at 476-1489 or 688-5472 from Watsonville.