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A 'safe house' in the neighborhood

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SOME SANTA Santa Cruz area women are banding together and taking their "sisters' " safety into their own hands these days. Through the Safehouse Project, they're striving to set up a network of temporary shelters for women and children in immediate need of a refuge.

The concept of a safehouse is similar to a neighborhood watch, in which individuals take responsibility for the safety of their community, said Iola Gold, Women's Crisis Support and Shelter Services. "The commitment and attention of the Safehouse Project is wonderful and really needed in the community," which could easily use another women's shelter, she said.

However, Gold said those who volunteer their homes for safehouses should be aware of the dangers involved, and of how much help the community is capable of providing.

To this end, organizers of the project have set up a five-part workshop series which all participants are required to take before their homes can qualify as safehouses. "Basically, it is a large commitment as far as preparing yourself," said Paula Marcus, 25, one of about a half-dozen Safehouse Project investigators.

The workshops include discussions and lectures on crisis counseling, first aid, self-defense, child abuse, domestic violence and information on community resources. Their purpose is to train women to handle a variety of situations, Marcus said.

The next workshop, focusing on child abuse, will be held 7-10 tonight at the Loudon Nelson Center. Newcomers should arrive at 6:30 p.m. for an orientation, Marcus said. Workshops are free, and open to all women and girls.

Anne Hill, 22, is one of Marcus' roommates, and a participant in the project. The workshops are "to get the basic facts and know what to look for," she

said, though no amount of information can predict how a woman will react when someone knocks on her door for help.

Gold said participants must be very well trained to "understand the situation that may be walking into their homes." A battered woman, for instance, has not only just left a dangerous situation, she may be endangering the safehouse.

Marcus said each safehouse participant will have to judge for herself whether she wants to deal with a situation. If in doubt or in need of advice, she can call one of the other women in the project network.

Though men can often have a role in a safehouse, only women can be safehouse volunteers, Marcus said, because the safehouses are for women and children who are often fleeing a violent man. If a woman is not at home, she should not display the safehouse logo in the window.

The logo depicts a woman opening the door to a woman and child and is green in color. After dark, a light is switched on behind the logo to make it noticeable from the street.

About 17 safehouses currently exist in the area and eight to 10 women are now participating in the workshops, Marcus said, which means that as many as 10 more safehouses may be set up when this workshop series is over. Ideally, a large network of safehouses will eventually be established, she said.

If women and children have a place to go to escape violent crimes, Marcus said, those crimes are less likely to occur. "Just the fact that people know these houses are here is a deterrent," she said.

Gold agreed that more safe havens are needed in the area. "Twenty-five percent of the homicides in the county are domestically related," she said.

However, groups whose purpose is to deal with domestic violence are underfunded, she said, so they often cannot provide the level of services needed by those who may be referred to them by safehouse volunteers. That's why it is important for volunteers to understand how much support each agency can give



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Paula Marcus is an organizer of the Safehouse project.

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