

SAFE Advocate Helps Victims of Domestic/Sexual Assault in Vernonia *continued from front page*

this, especially in rural communities,” says Stevens. She says the pilot program is designed to install partnerships with health clinics in smaller cities, because St. Helens has the only shelter in Columbia County for people who need a place to stay. The only domestic violence/sexual assault resource center, and hotline center are also located in St. Helens.”

Stevens points out that the lack of public transportation in Columbia County is just one of many barriers for someone experiencing domestic violence that keeps them from accessing services and getting the help they need. “It can be difficult for someone in this situation to get access to a car or even find the time to make the trip to St. Helens without their abuser knowing about it,” explains Stevens.

“And yet,” says Stevens, “there were still people from Vernonia making it over to St. Helens that were desperate enough to come and get support, and SAFE realized there must be a lot more people who are physically here that can’t make that trip, but could do something to help themselves if there were resources available locally,” says Stevens.

The general lack of resources in rural settings is another barrier. “In Columbia County there is not a lot of shelter space and the funding is limited and gets used up quickly,” says Stevens. “If everything is full here or depleted, someone might have to go over to Hillsboro or into Portland, where they might not even be able to get services because they don’t reside in those counties. The fact that there are less resources for people living out here is really scary for domestic violence and sexual assault situations.”

Fear of violence is also higher in a rural setting says Stevens. “In these situations in rural settings, the chances for lethality are a lot higher,” she ex-

plains. “It’s a lot more extreme. Abusers are a lot more likely to have access to firearms. Abusers are more likely to be able to restrict communications because there can be limited access or service for cell phones or the internet. A lot of these people are in some pretty gruesome situations and having a lot of really intense things happening to them. By the time these people are willing to take the risk to get away, it is sometimes the last option they have for their safety or the safety of their children.”

Stevens also notes the lack of comprehensive sex education in rural schools, and also small community size and fear of being ostracized, as being a deterrent to seeking help from an abusive relationship. “Everyone knows one another, everyone is friends with each other, everyone is related to each other, and everyone is interactive,” says Stevens. “If a survivor feels like their abuser has more pull in the community, that can stop them from speaking out or saying anything. By speaking out, not only do they risk tearing apart their immediate family, they also risk losing friends, other family, and relationships with businesses they interact with. And so many people still blame the victim.”

Partnering with a health clinic makes sense says Stevens. “When you think about the things that an abuser will allow their partner to do, it’s often very limited,” explains Stevens. “Usually it’s things like running errands for the home, child care, and basic health needs. So it’s difficult to try and find a way to create an intervention space within that very limited scope of activity that a survivor is allowed to do, which led to this partnership with the clinic.”

Stevens says that abusers will often manipulate and control their partners through reproductive health, pregnancies or family health, by either con-

tinually getting a partner pregnant or forcing them to either stay on, or not have access to birth control. “Having access to health care in a clinic is something a survivor is still able to do,” says Stevens. “Installing this service here at the Vernonia Health Center and creating access to what we call ‘warm hand-offs’ where we can get access to someone for 20 minutes and give them a chance to learn more about how they can stay safe, how they can protect themselves and their children, how they can get away and what their options are if that is something they are interested in.”

If someone is looking for more information or help for themselves or someone they know, they can access assistance at the Vernonia Health Center by walking in and asking to see the Healthy Relationships Advocate, or calling and scheduling an appointment. Another option is to contact the SAFE of Columbia County hotline where they can receive immediate assistance and also schedule an appointment to meet at the Vernonia clinic. The third option is to ask their provider for a referral to speak with the Healthy Relationships Advocate while at the clinic during another appointment.

Stevens has a varied background working with survivors of domestic violence. Following her graduation from VHS she attended the University of Portland, graduating with a degree in Psychology with a focus in Neuroscience. While at the University of Portland, Stevens began volunteering and received direct advocacy training from the Portland Women’s Crisis Line (now known as Call to Safety) and worked on the hotline doing crisis response. She also spent time working in a women’s homeless shelter in Portland, before moving to Americans Overseas Domestic Violence Crisis Center, where she worked helping women get back to the United

States who were experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault while living abroad.

Stevens says that in the first month of operations, she has started seeing four clients consistently in Vernonia and has had several other referrals. “We really weren’t expecting to be this busy, this fast,” says Stevens, “which is sad, but also very promising that the program is going to have a positive impact in the community.”

The sad, and deeply troubling reality is that this service – helping someone in a horrible situation – is needed, and also very taxing on those offering the assistance. “In the social work/advocacy field we have a term called ‘self-care,’” explains Stevens. “This is a strategy by which you recognize your body’s signals for stress and learn to step back away from work and do something relaxing. It can be as small as buying yourself a chocolate bar or taking a short walk. Personally I meditate and practice yoga whenever I start to feel taxed.”

Stevens says it’s important for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault to receive support from their community. “I think the community needs to remain unbiased and supportive of a victim,” says Stevens. “I don’t think it’s effective for the community to turn against the abuser either. If someone is saying, ‘I’m being hurt,’ we should provide them with sanctuary, and understanding, and try to learn more about their situation, instead of turning away and not wanting to get involved.”

You can reach the Vernonia Health Center at (503) 429-0622. You can reach SAFE of Columbia County at (503) 396-2538 or safeofcolumbiacounty.org. The SAFE 24-hour crisis hotline number is (503) 397-6161.

Meet the Candidates *continued from page 11*

county roads. “It would more than pay for itself, in fact, I think it would pay for itself four times.” He also said he would like to see the County do more chip sealing on their 600 miles of roads.

Magruder suggested setting aside some money to cover forecasted increased in their PERS budget and also to cover deferred maintenance projects. “Deferred maintenance only gets worse if you continue to defer it,” said Magruder.

What would you do to address economic development and job growth?

Magruder said we need to attract business and industry and take advantage of the 60 miles of river front and the deep water port in the County. She also suggested working with the Port of St. Helens to provide ready industrial space for businesses to occupy. She said she would work to develop relationships with the partners involved in the Oregon Manufacturing and Innovation Center (OMIC) coming to Scappoose, and suggested working to develop innovative timber related products and look for new uses for timber. She said government can play an important role in attracting the right businesses to communities and helping nurture

them.

Mayo said it was not government’s role to create jobs. “We get out of the way and let private industry create jobs, they’re the engine of American enterprise,” said Mayo. He said there are numerous small manufacturers with about 25 employees that are being taxed out of Portland that would like to get out, and suggested the Port of St. Helens create small parcels of property for them, noting the lower taxes, less traffic, good infrastructure, and good utility rates as positive draws for the County. He also suggested good schools can draw people and business to the County.

Leonetti said it was important to form a committee of business people to figure out what businesses we need here and then actively recruit them. He said we need a variety of businesses, not too many of the same type of business. He also suggested inviting more people to visit Vernonia, including bikers, car clubs and motorcyclists, and build up what we have to meet their needs.

Tierney said she was not optimistic about the development of the industrial park on California Avenue, but that the City should not give up yet. She said recreational tourism has been a big positive and expressed interest in finding ways to finish the CZ Trail connection to Vernonia and develop more bicycle tourism opportunities. She also noted the need for a public transportation district to help make communities livable, and allow older citizens to stay.

McNair said he agreed in part with Mayo’s statement that it is not government’s role to create

jobs. “But we can do things to make livability good by working to keep utility rates down, by building a good school, having a good quality Health Center, and a Senior Center,” said McNair. He said having the City provide micro loans to attract or retain businesses was another strategy.

Wagner praised the Chamber of Commerce and their efforts to be more active. She said she would like to revive the Economic Development Committee and start talking in a formative way about how to bring more businesses and partnerships to town. “Vernonia is a vibrant community and a great place for home based businesses,” said Wagner, noting the ability to ship products as a positive. She disagreed with Leonetti, noting the “synergy created by having multiple businesses of the same type,” and used as an example that having several antique stores might cause someone to stop and shop.

Buffum said he is for economic development and would like to see more businesses move into the community. He would like to see the City make allowances and incentivize growth. “I think the City is small and tries to get as much as they can from anyone trying to do business here,” said Buffum. “I think we need to find ways to invite them to come here.” He said he would like to see the City find a way to use the empty lots where homes were removed after the 2007 flood. “I know it’s because FEMA is involved, but things can change and the next thing you know the rules are different, and maybe we could do something with those lots.”

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