

Finding safety for the abused

BY JEANETTE WRIGHT
THE CLACKAMAS PRINT

After a year of being closed for rebuilding, Clackamas Womens' Services (CWS) reopened their Village of Hope.

CWS provides help to those in need of help after sexual or domestic abuse. Their headquarters is located at A Safe Place Family Justice Center in Oregon City.

"The Village is housed in a confidential spot in Clackamas County, and the building is specifically designed to help survivors feel safe and comfortable," Bethany Morris, CWS shelter coordinator said.

Originally a 1900's-era shelter, the building had to be rebuilt to accommodate the new services and space requirements CWS wanted to incorporate. The new building has lots of offices and living spaces, as well as community rooms for group use.

The Village is the largest emergency shelter in the Portland Metro area for women escaping domestic violence.

Unique to the Village, the base length of stay is 30 days, although participants may apply for an extension. "The average stay is two to three months," Kristin Schlotterbeck, CWS community education and communications program manager said.

Offices are available for meeting with outside resources, like law enforcement or counseling. 24-hour staff and help are available, with lines connecting law enforcement directly to the Village in case of urgent situations.

CWS has a counseling team that offers their services for free and can meet participants at the Village. Building connections with outside partners and helping survivors find the right programs, resources and aid is one of the biggest things CWS does.

"We recognize that we can't provide [everything]," said Angie Drake, housing program manager, "and in some cases probably shouldn't because there's already folks out there doing fantastic work. A big part for survivors' ongoing success and healing also includes breaking isolation which we believe is really at the core of abuse."

The Village also has rooms for community programs, such as yoga, self-care groups and support groups.

Support groups for sexual and domestic assault are currently held in both English and Spanish, and the Village has staff that can speak, Farsi, Spanish, Russian and English currently.

"This community-centered model is focused on building safe and supportive connections," Schlotterbeck said. "The opportunity for survivors of domestic violence to stay connected to their shelter community, particularly for their children, is a key component in breaking the isolation and depression that follow an abusive relationship."

"The best way to support someone would be to share your concerns and help mitigate any fears they may have for coming in."

— Kristin Schlotterbeck

As adaptable as the shelter is, the confidential aspect of it can be challenging. "I think sometimes participants just don't even know that, y'know, a place like this exists," Morris said. "We just feel so fortunate, really, to be able to be like, wait, this is a shelter. I think it's such a difference in the ways that people think of shelter being, maybe, like, gymnasiums, with, like, cots in it, and just some blank walls, and it was definitely one of the things that we were really just...trying to keep that "home" feel to it, and not have it feel so institutionalized."

Space is a huge concern for people jolted from their homes and seeking shelter, and the Village maximizes the space available by adding long hallways and lots of space in between doors to create a feeling of individual living spaces.

Bedrooms are adaptable, with walk-in closets and the possibility of adding beds, or cribs, to house all family sizes. There is room for approximately 13 women and their children to stay, and the Village usually sees around 100 women staying there each year.

"I think we recognize that sometimes shelters' space can be a barrier for larger families accessing shelter and that was one of the things we really wanted to make sure wasn't going to be a factor for participants trying to access shelter as well," Morris said.

The Village imposes no age, gender, or ability restrictions; for those with different ability needs, the village has a second building to meet those accommodations.

"Within shelter, we just see a lot of generational abuse that's happened, so we're able to take in families. That may be grandma, mom and kids," Morris said. "We don't exclude people. Like, we really try to be an inclusive shelter, and just low barriers, and so what we see within that is, if we can keep the family unit together as much as possible, then that's what we're wanting to do."

"We recognize that abuse doesn't just impact the person that it's directly targeted to, but it has those trickle effects within the family as well," Morris said.

Whether you are the person seeking help, or it's someone close to you, knowing about the available resources is vital.

"It can be really challenging to ask for help, especially if someone is being threatened with escalating violence if they do seek safety," Schlotterbeck said. "The best way to support someone would be to share your concerns and help mitigate any fears they may have for coming in. If you are close to the person experiencing violence, maybe offer to call the crisis line for them, or come with them to visit A Safe Place Family Justice Center."

A Safe Place Family Justice Center is open Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and the 24-hour crisis line can be reached at 1-888-654-2288.

photo by Jared Preble



The sign outside Village of Hope signifies an entrance to a safe location.



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