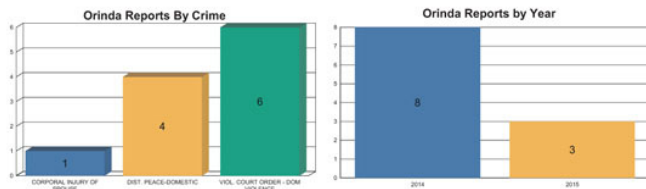


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A Beacon of Hope

By Laurie Snyder



Domestic Violence Related Incidents: Jan. 1, 2014 - April 12, 2015. Source: Contra Costa County Office of the Sheriff, Investigations Division, Crime Analysis Unit.

custody order violations at Glorietta Elementary, handled two domestic disturbances, one uncontrollable juvenile, three juvenile disturbances, and four calls for missing or runaway juveniles. Other worrisome situations during the past 16 months included nine batteries, one of which was a felony, unwanted guests or harassment at the library, one arrest for brandishing a weapon, and nine reports of threats made, six of which resulted in arrest.

Troubling as these statistics are, there is hope, says Orinda Vice-Mayor Victoria Smith. During a recent Contra Costa County Mayors' Conference meeting, Smith learned that the county has added a new tool in its fight to break the cycle of violence - a centralized center where residents affected by family stress, domestic violence, child or elder abuse, sexual assault, or human trafficking can get help.

"If you're in such a horrible situation - psychologically, emotionally, physically - you're facing an entire change to your life," observes Smith. "The idea that you can now go to just one place that is going to provide you with that whole network of services, it will take a chunk of the horrible burden off your shoulders - of anyone who needs help."

Until now, survivors of violence were forced to navigate a confusing maze from police to attorneys, shelters, the courts and other agencies. Recounting a story from the mayors' conference, Smith describes one domestic violence survivor reporting an incident to authorities in one town only to be sent to Martinez to obtain a restraining order. Expected to complete a blizzard of forms before the office closed in 30 minutes, she was then told she would also need to visit the Pittsburg Police - without considering the lack of public transportation or the victim's need for shelter and other aid.

On March 19, that process changed with the opening of the Family Justice Center at Todos Santos Plaza in Concord (www.cocofamilyjustice.org/). "The Family Justice Center model has been identified as a best practice by the United States Department of Justice, and is employed in eighty communities worldwide," says Susun Kim, Esq., the executive director who oversees operations of both the central branch FJC in Concord and the western branch in Richmond. "We bring resources to meet the needs of children, youth and families impacted by interpersonal violence."

The west county branch was founded in 2011 in response to the county's Zero Tolerance for

Orinda is a great place to live. Consistently ranked by the FBI as one of California's safest cities, it is so crime free that residents often leave doors unlocked and cars running while popping into the store for a quick errand. But many longtime Orindans will acknowledge, when pressed, that there is another, less lovely aspect to this pastoral paradise - the face of interpersonal violence.

Since 1999, there have been three homicides in Orinda - all domestic violence-related.

In addition, a glance at police blotters reveals that multiple other incidents - some violent, some that hold the potential for escalation - occur regularly. From January through March 2015, three domestic disturbances were reported with one arrest made for elder abuse. Police also responded to a restraining order violation in the 10 block of Orinda Way and custody order violation at Del Rey Elementary School.

In 2014, one arrest was made for corporal injury of a spouse. Police also responded twice to

Domestic Violence initiative (www.contracostazt.org/). Kim was named as its first executive director in March 2014. That same month, countywide strategic planning began for the central branch in Concord.

"When survivors of interpersonal violence seek help, they are often frustrated by a fractured system," explains Kim. "They may have to travel to multiple locations and tell their stories repeatedly. National estimates show that victims may have to access as many as 32 different agencies for assistance. These hurdles can discourage their efforts and cause many people to simply stop seeking help. The Center brings public and private partners together under one roof to provide wrap-around services. For families seeking services, coming to one location is faster, more immediately helpful, and far less expensive than traveling to multiple locations throughout the county. Victims no longer need to tell their stories multiple times, papers are filed right away and cases are completed more quickly, with the ultimate result that families can be safer sooner."

And these FJCs also reduce domestic violence-related homicides. "Each Family Justice Center client works with a trained and culturally competent Navigator who serves as the client's single and trusted point of contact," says Kim. "Navigators work with each family to complete comprehensive needs and risk assessment. They help clients to identify the goals and outcomes that each family would like to achieve. They also support clients to make safety plans and connect with all the services they need to find long term solutions, including employment, financial literacy and other economic assistance programs."

Concord's FJC is also perfectly situated for Orindans experiencing domestic violence but who are too afraid or ashamed to seek help, says Contra Costa County Supervisor Candace Andersen. "No one will see you going in; you can have complete anonymity."

Andersen knows all too well what can happen when victims don't get the help they need. "It hit home for me when one of my childhood playmates was murdered by her boyfriend. She was a bright woman with a bright future, majoring in women's studies," she says. "It happens in affluent areas more often than most people realize; domestic violence knows no socioeconomic boundaries."

Kim urges Orindans to call or stop by. "We can provide emotional support, legal advocacy and counseling. We can give you advice on how to stay safe and what to do when you don't feel safe. We can help you think through your options and make decisions for yourself and your family. We can provide support for your children. We will not judge you. We will not rush you. We will be your partners for a long time until you get to safety and independence."

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