

Long-awaited Family Justice Center comes to Fairfield

By Barry Eberling/From page A1 | December 16, 2012 | Leave Comment

FAIRFIELD – Carolyn Wold has long envisioned the Spanish-style building at 604 Empire St. as the home for the Solano County Family Justice Center.

Wold, the county's family violence prevention officer, recalled visiting the building five or so years ago when the county first looked at buying it, back when it was a dialysis center. She could see it as a place where government and nonprofit services serving victims of family violence could be under one roof.

Things didn't work out initially. The county bought the Empire Street building in 2007 for \$1.7 million and put its printing and reproduction services there. The county in 2011 located a Family Justice Center in the District Attorney's Office on the fourth floor of the Government Center, but it has only three offices and a few cubicles.

The time for a full-fledged Family Justice Center has come. The county has disbanded its printing department and the 604 Empire St. building is empty. On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors voted to use the building for the center.

"It's really all about crime prevention and saving lives," District Attorney Donald du Bain said.

Solano County this year has had two deaths related to family violence. In 2010, it had 10. The Family Justice Center serves victims of domestic violence, dating violence, elder abuse, stalking and child abuse, be they male or female.

Wold sees advantages to the new location that go beyond the small space available in the District Attorney's Office.

"For our victims, this is going to be a lot easier and attractive for them to approach," Wold said. "The Government Center can be overwhelming."

"And the D.A.'s office can be scary for some victims," du Bain said.

The Family Justice Center should open on Empire Street in late January or February, Wold said.

Wold and du Bain on Wednesday walked through the empty building. Wold showed the area where children will be able to play while a parent is receiving services.

"They don't need to hear mom talking about the abuse that happened to her," Wold said.

Six Flags Discovery Kingdom donated wall panels with paintings of sharks, tigers and other wildlife. It also donated stuffed animals several feet tall, ranging from Dalmatians to pandas. The Solano County Office of Education will provide tutors for the children.

One room will have a Sheriff's Office employee and county Office of Family Violence Prevention staff and advocates. Victims can receive help from advocates for such things as filling out restraining orders, as well as have someone to go with them for court appearances when the batterer is prosecuted.

"When the perpetrator is staring across the aisle from them (in court) and giving them looks like they want to hurt them, it's scary," Wold said.

Another room will have advocates from the nonprofit LIFT3 Support Group. Unlike the Office of Family Violence Prevention advocates, these advocates are not connected with the District Attorney's Office.

"They don't share victim information with anyone – including us," Wold said.

Wold and du Bain showed the room that will be used for chaplain services organized by the Rev. David Isom of St. Stephen CME Church in Fairfield. Wold said many family violence victims request spiritual counseling.

The county Health and Social Services Department will have employees in a room to help victims receive financial assistance for such necessities as food and utilities. Wold said many batterers keep rent payments a month or two behind.

"Which is one reason (victims) fight us when we want to prosecute the batterer, because they don't want to be homeless," Wold said.

One room has been designated as the "safe" room. It has no windows.

"If we have a victim who is really scared and is concerned her batterer is stalking her, we can put her in there," Wold said.

Another room will have a forensic medical unit, with help from Kaiser Permanente and Touro University. Child Haven, which helps children who have been victims of abuse and neglect, will have a presence at the center.

In addition, the center will house the Safe Harbor Visitation Center. Children and noncustodial parents will be able to have supervised visits there.

The present version of the Family Justice Center at the District Attorney's Office serves about four families a week. Wold expects the Empire Street version to serve 23 families a week.

San Diego, a decade ago, started a family justice center that its website states is the first in the nation. Wold said a national initiative in 2005 made grants available to establish these centers, with Alameda County receiving \$1.5 million. Solano County is using the Alameda center as a model.

But Solano County needed to establish its center without a grant. The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday approved spending up to \$218,000 on the Empire Street center as a 30-month pilot project.

At the meeting, Wold showed a chart demonstrating what victims seeking services face without the Family Justice Center and its one-stop concept. The chart depicted about 45 different services available at various locations.

"We have met the enemy and it is us," Supervisor Mike Reagan said.

He praised the idea of having a navigable set of services at the Family Justice Center, so victims don't have to deal with a fragmented bureaucracy.

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