

'One-Stop' center for domestic violence victims in the works.

by Sebastian Montes | Staff Writer

A select group of county officials and family advocates began defining the future of a "one-stop" center for victims of domestic violence, set to open in March in Rockville.

Modeled after a widely hailed system of Family Justice Centers around the nation, the county's version has been several years in the making, driven by domestic violence advocates and spear-headed by County Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg. The county-funded Family Justice Center will provide a range of services under one roof — including the sheriff's office to help with protective orders, the State's Attorney's office to help with criminal charges, legal advocates, referrals to shelters and child services and help with immigration issues.

Under the tutelage of the late Marilyn J. Praisner, Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda identified the Family Justice Center as one of her top priorities when elected in 2006. The idea quickly won support, she said at a kick-off event Sunday night, but it has taken tireless work from all sides to make it a reality.

"It was a long road to get here, and I feel enormously grateful to everyone here ... We understand that family violence permeates every level of society, that it really does limit the possibilities of children and families and it challenges the community in many ways," she said.

A meet-and-greet Sunday night at the Glenview Mansion in Rockville kicked off the strategic planning sessions today and tomorrow. The sessions, which drew dozens of participants, were not open to the public because it was "an internal process," said William Klein, a Trachtenberg spokesman.

"My sentiment is that it's not a public meeting. It's akin to a board of trustees having a workshop," he said.

The sessions were a chance to nail down logistical issues of which agencies will move in and when, said Terry O'Neill, Trachtenberg's chief of staff, and how they will interact to streamline victims' legal processes such as divorce, child custody and property settlement issues; counseling; response and prevention; and confidentiality and security issues.

The 24-hour center, funded by \$750,000 in the fiscal 2009 budget, is slated to move in to the 4th floor of an office building at 603 E. Jefferson St. in downtown Rockville — a central, accessible location near courthouses and other support agencies.

In the first phase, the domestic violence components of the Sheriff's and State's Attorney's offices will move in, as well as relevant pieces of the county's Department of Health and Human Services, and community groups that might get involved, such as legal advocates, O'Neill said. When more money becomes available, a second phase would bring in police and child welfare and assessment services.

Casey Gwinn, president of the National Family Justice Center Alliance, is providing advice and technical guidance. He helped establish the first Family Justice Center San Diego in 2002 when he was the top public prosecutor there. There are now 40 such centers nationwide and another 40 in planning, he said Sunday night — all of them successful only insofar as the various agencies involved commit to cooperating with each other.

"I have no doubt that Montgomery County is going to be one of those model centers and leading centers. It's a simple concept — co-located services. It's just hard to do. It's a principle of physics; everything goes from order to disorder over time. You put people together and agencies don't want to stay together, they tend to drift — ego, personality, turf," he said. "And to keep trying, leadership matters. And that's why I have so much hope for Montgomery County, is because of committed leaders. So if leadership keeps working on this and you keep the power of 'We,' you can go forward. I have no doubt that in the final analysis, 20 years from now, the fact that you are going through this together here today, is going to have an impact on the world, and thousands of families in the future."