Emergency Shelters
Across State For Battered Women

In Louisiana last year, over 5,000 battered women and their children sought aid and refuge through emergency residential shelters and non-residential programs. In New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Alexandria, Shreveport, Lake Charles, and Lafayette. But according to Pat Evans, Director of the Women's Advocacy Bureau of the Louisiana Department of Social Services, there is still a pressing need for more programs to aid victims of family violence.

BATTERED THOUSANDS ANNUALLY

Louisiana statistics indicate that thousands of women are regularly beaten, tortured, and in many cases killed by husbands and boyfriends. The New Orleans Police Department receives over 200 calls a day related to family violence.

Crescent House in New Orleans, the largest battered women's shelter in the state, serves over 600 victims within a nine month period. At the same time, however, there were more than twice as many people were denied services due to lack of space.

Jace Schinderman, Director of Crescent House, states that "so many women are being battered and have no place to go. There is a crying need for emergency shelter for battered women and their children." DANGEROUS CALLS DANGEROUS FOR POLICE

Answering domestic disturbance calls poses critical problem for the police; one out of every five officers who loses his life on the job does so trying to break up family fights. Colonel John Firmin of the Baton Rouge Police Department confirms that domestic disturbance calls are the most dangerous types of complaints; more police are injured and killed making it the largest single category of deaths.

Colonel Firmin explains that "an irate husband doesn't want the police to interfere, and might turn on the police."

Immediate access to private counseling, referral services, and temporary emergency housing make up a large part of the programs established to combat domestic violence in Louisiana.

NEW ORLEANS PROGRAM

The YWCA Battered Women’s Program in New Orleans, established in 1977, is the oldest and the largest program aiding victims of domestic violence in the state. The program serves a five parish area, offering community education programs through television and radio shows, and addressing clubs and groups on the issue of domestic violence.

The center has a staff of six counselors, a lawyer a community educator, and over 40 volunteers.

A 24 hour crisis line assists women in emergency cases, referring them to Crescent House or the Salvation Army.

BATON ROUGE

In addition to Crescent House, Louisiana has four other shelters. The Baton Rouge Battered Women’s Program opened its doors in February of this year and has already helped close to 500 persons in both temporary shelter and counseling services.

The Family Violence Program of the YWCA in Shreveport aided over 250 persons during a nine month period in 1980-81. Shreveport police and social service agencies reported 1,840 calls connected with family violence last year.

LAKE CHARLES

The Calcasieu Women's Shelter, Inc. in Lake Charles served over 450 persons within a recent nine month period; but because the need is so much greater, a new facility accommodating twice as many victims is presently under construction. Sara Edwards, Director of the Calcasieu shelter describes this as "a dream come true since the hardest thing we, as staff, have to do is tell people that we don't have room for them."

The shelters provide temporary housing for battered women and their children. They also offer 24-hour residential assistance, counseling, advocacy, child-care, and referral services.

The average shelter houses 15 persons with a 30 day maximum length of stay. Every shelter in Louisiana has a waiting list of from ten to twenty-five persons.

WOMEN'S ADVOCACY BUREAU

According to Diane Wirshp, Director of the Women’s Advocacy Bureau's Planning Unit, children continue their schooling, and must deal with the responsibilities at the shelter. "They adjust quickly and are generally happy," she adds. One weekends, volunteers take the children on day trips, picnics, or to the movies.

Ms. Wirshp states that neighborhood day care centers look after children while their mothers look for jobs or for new living arrangements. She emphasizes that "the shelters provide the battered woman time to reflect and to decide on what to do next. She no longer feels so isolated, and she regains confidence and support from her peers. She begins to see that there are alternatives to living in abusive situations."

Women who have been victims of abuse often return to the shelter as volunteers. "They lead group sessions, share experiences, and are instrumental in finding leads in employment," stresses Sara Edwards.

One woman who sought refuge at the Calcasieu shelter recently stated, "I will try in any way help and support the shelter and other women that need help. I may not be able to give much, but I am willing to do what it takes." Louisiana has two non-residential outreach programs designed for battered women who have not yet decided whether to leave their homes, who have found alternate lodging, or who are denied admittance to a shelter for lack of space.

These community-based centers provide emergency psychological support and counseling, as well as information and referral services pertaining to job counseling and placement assistance, training programs, housing, emergency medical care, and legal assistance.

FAMILY COUNSELING, ALEXANDRIA

The Family Counseling Agency in Alexandria has served over 170 persons in the first five months of operation in 1981. This is the only organization in all of central Louisiana that provides services for victims of family violence.

The Alexandria Police Department alone received 5,035 calls concerning family violence in 1980.

SAFE HOMES

BATON ROUGE

Since February of this year, the YWCA of Baton Rouge has been sponsoring a new "Safe Homes" program. This pilot project is designed to provide immediate emergency housing in a private residence for up to three days. Only food and shelter are offered.

The battered women receive counseling and other services at the Baton Rouge Battered Women's Program.

In the first four months of operation, over 130 persons took advantage of this arrangement. Besides providing space in one's home, volunteers offer telephone assistance and escort services.

ST. TAMMANY PROJECT

The YWCA St. Tammany Family Violence Project is an adjunct of the New Orleans Battered Women's Program. It is open five days a week and offers confidential services including counseling, legal rights, and referrals to appropriate social service agencies.

LOUISIANA COALITION

Two years ago, the Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence was established. This coalition is made up of staff from all the state domestic violence programs and community members interested in this problem.

It meets four times a year to discuss programs and share information on techniques and assistance. The coalition is representing the library of films, books, and journals for program use and community education.

The crime of wife-beating cuts across all social, economic, ethnic, and educational lines. Perhaps the only common personality link found among a large percentage of violent men and abused women is having either experienced abuse as a child, or witnessed it between parents. The impression children carry into adulthood may therefore be that violence within the family is the norm.

Jace Schinderman maintains that "when a child grows up in a home where violence is an acceptable way of dealing with anger and frustration, then they grow up lacking the 'no physical violence' value and repeat the cycle." Pat Evans acknowledges that the destructive cycle must be broken; children must learn that violence is inappropriate behavior.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ALLOVER THE STATE

The Women's Advocacy Bureau reports that although domestic violence occurs in all parts of the state, many areas of Louisiana offer no kinds of services. For instance, last year in Houma, which has a total population of 45,000, 354 persons called the local YWCA seeking help, only to find that no services were available due to lack of funding.

And last year in Monroe, which also provides no support services, court records indicate that there were 700 requests for assistance relating to family violence.

"The facts speak for themselves," asserts Pat Evans, "and they tell us violence is rampant inside families. We must pay at least as much attention to violence in the family as we pay to violence in the streets."