

Coordinate efforts

by Susan Block

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Recent headlines remind us that domestic violence often has tragic consequences for women and their children.

Approximately 95 percent of the victims of this abuse are women. It is estimated that 3 million to 4 million women are battered each year by their husbands or intimate partners. Furthermore, studies indicate that 30 to 50 percent of the men who frequently assault their wives also frequently abuse their children. Children's safety and well-being often depend on their mother's safety.

St. Louis County now has a unique opportunity to develop a coordinated community response to cases in which both women and children are abused. We are one of six national sites awarded federal funding to launch the Greenbook Initiative. This is designed to bring together groups that address adult abuse and child maltreatment.

Under the initiative, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services will work with the Missouri Division of Family Services, St. Louis County Children Services and the county's family court as well as local organizations that work with domestic violence victims. The guiding principle is to keep women and children SAFE. The acronym stands for:

S = safety, stability and well being for victims. This includes keeping children with their non-offending parent.

A = accountability for abusive men.

F = family-friendly interventions that respect differences and build on strengths.

E = entry points for obtaining service that are varied and coordinated.

To put these principles into practice, agencies that respond to domestic violence and child maltreatment need to increase their ability to address these dual issues. They need to improve the way they work together to fill in gaps in service.

In addition, the community at large must end its apathy toward women and children who are victims of abuse. It must gain a better understanding of how to deal with domestic violence and child abuse and neglect when they occur in the same family.

The broad-based agency and community changes needed to ensure the success of the Greenbook Initiative can only come about by building strong community collaboration. We will need the participation, buy-in and action planning of a diverse group of stakeholders who represent partner agencies, community-based service providers, victims, funders, lawmakers and community leaders.

Will we continue to read about tragedies that occur as a result of child maltreatment and domestic violence? The answer depends on us. *Susan Block is administrative judge of the St. Louis County Family Court. For more information about this project, contact Norma Ellington-Twitty at 314-962-6866, extension 33.*