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Pinellas County Receives \$550,000 Grant for Domestic Violence Initiatives

CLEARWATER - More than a half million dollars in federal grant money has been awarded to Pinellas County to better assist domestic violence victims, whether they are involved in a divorce, need access to resources to deal with issues such as trauma, or need legal help.

The \$549,992 three-year grant comes from the Justice for Families Program, whose mission it is to improve the response of the civil and criminal justice system to families with a history of, among other things, domestic violence.

The Justice for Families Program falls under the auspices of the Office of Violence Against Women, which in turn falls under the U.S. Justice Department.

The grant kicks in on Oct. 1, which, coincidentally, is the first day of National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Part of the money will go toward enlisting the services of a Guardian ad Litem if a judge believes domestic violence might be a factor in a family case, such as a divorce. The Guardian ad Litem would investigate and make recommendations to the judge that might touch on issues such as visitation.

That Guardian ad Litem – along with judges, child psychologists and parent coordinators, among others – would first be trained in an approach, sanctioned by the Battered Women’s Justice Project, that is known by its acronym as SAFeR.

First, the Guardian ad Litem would screen (ergo the S) for what is called Intimate Partner Violence or IPV. He or she would look for signs of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, abuse revolving around the spiritual or ethical, stalking and coercive control.

Then the Guardian ad Litem would assess the nature and context of the IPV (ergo the A) before focusing (F) on the effects of IPV on the petitioner and any children involved.

Finally, the Guardian ad Litem would respond (ergo the R), by making recommendations to the judge. The process is broken down into its four stages so that the Guardian ad Litem acts painstakingly to avoid making assumptions and leaping to conclusions.

In addition to training, part of the grant will go toward paying for 16 Guardians ad Litem appointments for a given year.

Another part of the grant will go toward having lawyers available to assist petitioners seeking a violence-related restraining order, with attorneys taking on a total of 50 cases. The attorneys will also be on standby for return hearings, which are the final hearings on domestic violence petitions.

Finally, the remainder of the grant will make it possible for the two major non-profit organizations dealing with domestic violence -- Community Action Stops Abuse (or CASA) in St. Petersburg and RCS Pinellas in Clearwater – to staff the intake centers in the Clerk of the Circuit Courts offices in St. Petersburg and Clearwater 40 hours a week.. These advocates direct victims to resources they might otherwise not know of, such as assistance with housing, food, child care, and counseling. They also provide moral support during court proceedings.



Circuit Judge Jack Helinger listening to a woman seeking an injunction