

Feds recognize Alameda and Contra Costa counties for work caring for domestic violence victims

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OAKLAND -- In recognition of 20 years since the passage of the Violence Against Women Act, federal officials this week visited East Bay family justice centers to applaud efforts in Alameda and Contra Costa counties to protect women and children.

Both East Bay counties are considered to be leaders nationwide in how they respond to and address domestic violence and other crimes against women at the local level. Both Alameda and Contra Costa counties use a "coordinated response" model, in which police, prosecutors and victim advocates all work together to address an individual victim's needs.



Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley speaks during a news conference at the Alameda County Family Justice Center in Oakland on Jan. 9.

"It's all of us working together in a coordinated response that enables us to make a real difference in the lives of victims," Bea Hanson, principal deputy director of the U.S. Office on Violence Against Women, said Thursday at Alameda County's Family Justice Center in Oakland. "When we talk about these issues, we know this is a problem that's chronic. We know that this is a problem that's been going on for a long time, it affects so many of us and that we can only address it by working together in a coordinated fashion."

The Oakland center and Contra Costa County's Central Family Justice Center in Concord are among more than 20 stops on a tour of what Hanson called "communities that are really exemplars of this coordinated community response to address violence against women." With help of national funding, they've brought innovations in the area of domestic violence response, such as addressing special needs of immigrant and LGBT communities. Since the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, the federal office has given out nearly \$6 billion to communities across the country.

"It wasn't that long ago when law enforcement would show up at a 'domestic disturbance' call and suggest the aggressor take a walk around the block to cool off. Today, officers are specially trained, understand how to spot a dangerous situation, and even help diffuse it," said Devorah Levine, director of Contra Costa County's Zero Tolerance Against Domestic Violence Initiative. "The growing number of community agencies and culturally specific innovations happening in the East Bay are shining a spotlight on issues that haven't surfaced in the past."

The statistics are that one in four women will be or has been a victim of domestic violence, one in five will be a victim of sexual assault, one in six will be a victim of stalking, and men are victims as well at a lower rate, Hanson said.

Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley was a victim advocate at a rape crisis center and a domestic violence shelter early in her career.

"I remember what it was like when victims had no voice and had no rights," O'Malley said Thursday. "And they were abused in every way, not just from the abusers, but from the system, from law enforcement. There were no advocates that were there to help besides volunteers like myself. I remember those days and I'm proud to be part of the solution and the change that has brought us to where we are now."

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