

Renovated Home Provides Place of “Refuge” for Battered Women

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Karla* says she didn’t have anywhere to go. After years of enduring sexual abuse, and battling a drug problem, she knew something had to change. It was either live like this, or die on the street. Luckily, she found the Refuge House.

For every Karla there are hundreds more who share her same story. And when others turned their backs on these women, a few extended a helping hand.

The Refuge House has been providing a safe haven for battered and abused women in Tallahassee for years. Recently, the facility was expanded, thanks in part to a Demonstration Loan commitment (RFP 2004/04-01) of \$469,008 from Florida Housing.

Today, the newly remodeled and expanded home—part of the Refuge House’s 360 program—provides a cozy living environment for nine women and their children. The renovation greatly expanded the existing structure, adding several more rooms, a larger living and recreational room, and more.

Patricia Smith, Refuge House director, explains how the building is far more than a typical shelter.

She says the success of the shelter is directly attributable to the overall structure of the living environment it provides.

“We give the women the freedom to control their own environment,” Smith said. “This gives each woman a sense of pride... something that is often lacking in their morale.”

The Refuge House has been providing morale support for some time now. The center first opened on Valentine’s Day in 1978; it later merged with Tallahassee Rape Crisis to provide sexual violence services.

Its mission is to provide direct services to battered women, their children and sexual assault survivors, as well as to eliminate conditions in society that allow such violence to continue.

The center continues working to fulfill this mission, and is the domestic and sexual violence center for Leon and the seven neighboring counties in North Florida: Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Liberty, Madison, Taylor and Wakulla.

When walking through the communal house, you really get a sense that those who live here truly appreciate their home, even if it’s just temporary. Residents are permitted to decorate their rooms as they see fit; each

has to abide by the house rules, such as cleaning up after themselves, meeting a curfew, etc.

One might think that so many women living together in one space would be a recipe for disaster. However, Smith says that’s not the case at all. In fact, the women all mentioned that they get along great with their housemates.

She says the reason the system functions so smoothly is a direct result of the women having a sense of pride in what they consider “their own place.” This solid living environment, Smith says, only enhances their desire to reach their goals.

This program has many women wanting to get into the house. The women know this and, as such, they take their situation seriously.

Smith says they’re careful not to allow the home to become a turnstile for those not truly committed to changing their behavior.

“We don’t have a waiting list because we don’t want people waiting to get in here because [they] put their lives on hold,” she said.

To ensure only the neediest women are taken into the program, a committee of three decides who can enter. The selection is based on several criteria, including an evaluation of each woman’s case, as well as an application. Once admitted to the program, the women typically spend anywhere from a few to several months at the house. Mothers with children typically receive their own room, while singles often share.

After a certain amount of time, each guest is evaluated to determine whether or not she is ready to move on to more a permanent living environment—the townhomes.

Taking the Next Step

The women must complete a certain number of phases in order to transition to the townhomes. These homes are the last step before the women are fully ready to exit the program.

Smith says that, once again, a committee makes the decision as to whether a resident is ready to move on; she admits that doing so is sometimes tricky. They have to be absolutely sure that the resident is, in fact, ready to take on a much greater responsibility.

“We don’t want to set the women up for failure,” Smith said.

For those who are permitted to move on, they find a fairly typical living environment waiting, free of the stricter rules present in the Refuge House. Smith points out that this amount of freedom is vital in establishing the women’s identity in society.

She says past experience indicates that the prospect of moving into the townhomes is a driving force behind the women working to complete their program. She constantly hears from the women that this is their main goal.

Judging Success Rate Often Tricky

Typically, programs like the one at the Refuge House are judged on percentages and how many women simply continue to cycle through the program. Prisons do the same, as recidivism rates show the perceived successes amongst reformed inmates.

However, judging the success rate at the Refuge House is a bit trickier. According to Smith, this is due to several reasons, one being that once the women leave the program, they typically move away from the general area. This can make it hard to keep up with their progress.

Still, those looking for something tangible could easily point to one of the shining successes—the fact that, so far, only once has a woman left the house and returned. Smith, however, admits that you have to look at the broader picture to see the real results.

“It’s the woman going back to college, the woman changing her credentials to practice law, the woman who took her children to the doctor for the very first time. Those are successes to us.”

One could also look at Karla. Once down and out on the streets, with nowhere to turn, she has blossomed in the program and, now, has a goal to rejoin the workforce in the clerical field.

She says she doesn’t know where she’d be if not for the 360 program. “When they received the money for this new program it was a turning point for me.”

These types of stories abound in the Refuge House. And it’s all due in no small part to the valuable work the individuals at the Refuge House are doing everyday.

And to Smith, the key to success is clear: “Give the women an opportunity and they will go far.” ◀

**Name has been changed to protect identity.*