

# Sonoma County's Family Justice Center

EILEEN CAVAN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the growing trend in delivery of services to clients provided through collaborative efforts or “one stop shopping” models, Family Justice Centers are being developed all over the country to address violence in our communities. The “one-stop” model enables victims of violence to access all of the services they need, including medical, law enforcement and mental health all under one roof. In 2008 Sonoma County convened a stakeholders group, followed by the three phases of development outlined by the National Family Justice Center Alliance to create their own Family Justice Center. They conducted a needs assessment of their community, developed a strategic plan to open a center and, now that it is operational, are conducting on-going self-evaluations.

Sonoma County already had a Child Advocacy Center, the Redwood Children's Center, which is a collaboration of agencies that provides services to

child victims of sexual assault. For economic reasons and in an attempt to deliver services to all victims of violence in a more comprehensive setting, Sonoma County Child Protective Services has made the decision to move the Child Advocacy Center into the Sonoma Family Justice Center.

San Francisco County is currently planning to open a new Child Advocacy Center that uses a collaborative model very similar to the one used by the Redwood Children's Center in Sonoma County. Although the location for San Francisco's new center has already been identified, as well as the collaborating community partners, an excellent future goal would be for San Francisco to open its own Family Justice Center and to have the Child Advocacy Center located at the same site to support a collaboration to serve both adult and child victims of violence.

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## Introduction

With the ever-increasing rate of violence in their community, San Diego County opened the first Family Justice Center (FJC) in the United States in 2002 to address the needs of victims of violence with a more comprehensive model. The United States Department of Justice, through its Office on Violence against Women (OVM), identified the Family Justice Center model as a best practice in the field of domestic violence intervention and prevention services.

The goal of the model is simple: "To provide one safe place where victims and their children can go to get all their services under one roof. The model seeks to wrap victims in support and services and end the frustrating journey for victims of having to go from agency to agency, telling their story over and over again in order to get the help they need."<sup>1</sup> Other counties saw the results in San Diego and opened their own Family Justice Centers including Sonoma County which began serving clients on April 1, 2010. There are currently over Seventy Family Justice Centers in operation in the United States, ten abroad and one hundred in development stages worldwide, all using similar models. The lead agency helping to create Family Justice Centers is the National Family Justice Center Alliance.

According to the National Family Justice Center Alliance, "there are three phases necessary to developing a center:

- **Phase I**—assesses a community's readiness for creating a Family Justice Center.
- **Phase II**—involves the creation of the actual Strategic Plan and the implementation process for

the plan. The Planning Process takes a great deal of preparation and stakeholder outreach, including 2-3 days of actual planning meetings. This process produces a written plan with the Mission, Vision, Values, and Strategic Activities necessary to create a successful Center.

- **Phase III**—occurs after the Center has opened. The Alliance often conducts a Family Justice Center Snapshot Evaluation. The Snapshot is an evaluation tool, with weighted scoring mechanisms, designed to evaluate the operational effectiveness of a Center and identify needed areas of improvement.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

Laura Colgate, director of the Family Justice Center in Sonoma helped start Phase I in 2008 when Sonoma County's stakeholders group conducted a needs assessment of the community. The results of the needs assessment pointed out that the three areas Sonoma County needed to focus on were Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Elder Abuse.

Government and non-profit partners investigated the feasibility of establishing a Family Justice Center in Sonoma County in the hopes of realizing the following primary outcomes:

- Increased victim safety and increased family violence reporting;
- Reduced number of family violence homicides and significant injury cases;
- Increased numbers of successful prosecutions;
- Reduced number of case dismissals;
- Reduced recidivism in family violence cases;
- Increased public awareness of family violence;

- Increased access to and utilization of family violence services; and
- Increased funding amounts and sources for family violence services.
- Sharing best practices between partners through open communication and shared training; and
- Enabling operational cost reductions for service providers through efficiencies of scale.<sup>3</sup>

The Family Justice Center seeks to generate these outcomes through a strategic collaboration between law enforcement, prosecution, government, and non-profit service providers that would involve:

- Providing easily accessible, comprehensive services to victims of family violence;
- Coordination and co-location of services including law enforcement, prosecution, victim advocacy, shelter/safety needs, restraining orders, legal assistance, counseling and support services, and possibly others, such as medical, job training, life skills, and childcare;
- Comprehensive, culturally competent, and multi-lingual community outreach;
- Coordinated education, intervention and prevention initiatives that would increase public awareness of the danger signs of family violence and of the services available;

Once the needs of the community had been identified, the project moved into Phase II, strategic planning. Sonoma County bought a 20,000 square foot building in the “super block” area of Sonoma which encompasses the Hall of Justice, the Sheriff’s Department, Sonoma County Jail and various social service agencies. Funds from tobacco taxes were used to partly fund the purchase of the facility. There is a zero general fund impact on the county budget as the building is paid for and each agency in the collaborative has a paid staff member working out of the Family Justice Center. The Center has the full support of the Board of Supervisors and Laura Colgate writes grants to pay the operational costs of the facility, as well as her salary. The strategic plan was designed by the members of the collaboration which includes a representative from the following departments and agencies:

**TABLE 1**  
**Members of the Collaboration that Designed the Strategic Plan**

<b>On-site partners:</b>	<b>Off-site partners:</b>
District Attorney’s Office	County of Sonoma Department of Health
Victim Services Division	Sonoma County Law Enforcement Chief Assn.
Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office	Probation Department
City of Santa Rosa Police Department	Superior and Domestic Violence Court
Y.W.C.A.	Family Violence Prevention Council
Verity	Community Child Care Council of Sonoma County
Catholic Charities	Kaiser Permanente
Council on Aging	Southwest Community Health Center
Legal Aid	Redwood Community Health Coalition
Inter-Tribal Council of California, Inc.	Sutter Health Foundation
FJCS Deaf H/H Advocate services	Planned Parenthood
Chaplaincy Services	Santa Rosa Community Health Services
County of Sonoma Human Services	Memorial Hospital

A strategic plan was developed and implemented enabling the Family Justice Center to open the doors of its new facility on August 22, 2012. Included in the strategic plan is the center's mission statement which drives how services are provided to clients:

"The Family Justice Center Sonoma County empowers family violence victims to live free from violence and abuse by providing comprehensive services, centered on and around the victim, through a single point of access. We follow best practices in the field, track our outcomes, and meet the needs of our entire community with culturally competent services and links to remote neighborhoods, building on strong interagency collaboration, we protect the vulnerable, stop the violence, and restore hope."<sup>4</sup>

### **Redwood Children's Center, Sonoma**

The Redwood Children's Center (RCC) exists to provide a child-friendly setting in which children and youth can be interviewed using the skills and knowledge of a multi-disciplinary team, to ascertain the facts and discover the truth concerning suspected child sexual abuse. The RCC is a Child Advocacy Center (CAC) similar to many other CAC's in California which use a multi-disciplinary approach to address the needs of child victims of sexual abuse. The CAC model is also similar to the Family Justice Center model as it uses a collaborative approach to offering all services to victims of violence in one facility. The Redwood Children's Center is currently housed in the Valley of the Moon Children's Center in Sonoma which also serves as a temporary shelter for children who have been removed by the court from their parents due to abuse or neglect. Suni Levi, Coordinator of the RCC, has been working with the Sonoma Family Justice Center in Sonoma to relocate the RCC to the FJC with the goal of re-linking the CAC with Emergency Response Workers from Child Protective Services and the Office of Criminal Justice. Currently the RCC is approximately a half hour drive from the FJC which makes it time consuming and less efficient to set up multi-disciplinary forensic sex abuse interviews.

### **Child Advocacy Center, San Francisco**

San Francisco County is in the process of opening a new CAC which is slated to open in March 2013. The San Francisco Child Abuse Prevention Council, directed by Katie Albright, is the lead agency for locating and securing funds for the new CAC building. Dr. Christopher Stewart is the director of the CAC and Gloria Samayoa is the Multi-Disciplinary Interview (MDI) Coordinator. Currently the SF Multi-Disciplinary Interview Center (MDIC) is located at San Francisco General Hospital at the Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Resource Center (CASARC) office which is in the same building as the Child Protection Center, a 24 hour center which cares for children awaiting foster care placement. The MDIC model for interviewing child victims of sexual assault is similar to the model used at the Redwood Children's Center in Sonoma. The child victim is interviewed by an expert in child forensics in a room with a two-way mirror so that a representative from the juvenile police division, the district attorney's office, the Child Protective Services Worker, a victim advocate from the SF District Attorney's office, a medical provider and a mental health provider (as needed) can watch the interview in process. The interview is also videotaped in its entirety for possible evidence in criminal and dependency investigations.

### **Recommendations for San Francisco**

Family violence cannot be separated into adult violence and child violence as every family member is affected differently by the violence and it affects the family system as a whole. There is also a high correlation between domestic violence, and violence against children which causes the cycle of abuse to continue. Using a model that treats the whole family in one center would be a more effective model in reducing the high rate of recidivism of violence in families and in reaching a societal goal of eliminating violence in our communities. Although San Francisco County is in the process of opening a new, separate Child Advocacy Center, Sonoma's idea of moving the Redwood Children's Center to the Family

Justice Center makes sense on many levels. Because all of the key players in the multi-disciplinary interview are already located at the Family Justice Center, it is more efficient and better serves the victims to have the two programs co-located. Based on what has been learned in this study, San Francisco County should convene a stakeholders group to assess the need for its own Family Justice Center. If deemed a need in the community, the San Francisco Child Advocacy Center should become one of the collaborators located in the center.

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### **References**

- 1, 2:** National Family Justice Center Alliance Website ([www.familyjusticecenter.org](http://www.familyjusticecenter.org))
- 3:** Sonoma County Feasibility Study-Public Record through the Sonoma Board of Supervisors
- 4:** Sonoma County Family Justice Center Website ([www.fjcsc.org](http://www.fjcsc.org))