

Alliance to combat domestic violence

By Candice Combs Staff Writer

Officials on Thursday formed the Chattanooga Family Justice Alliance, a cooperative pool of police, lawyers and counselors with one mission — to reduce domestic violence.

"We have met, and our purpose is simple," Hamilton County District Attorney Bill Cox said. "We will reduce the incidents of domestic violence in Hamilton County."

About 38 percent of Chattanooga's homicides in 2003 were domestic in nature, far above the national average of 26 percent, records show. Only 20 percent of domestic assaults are reported in Hamilton County, according to the alliance.

The alliance brings together the expertise and resources of law enforcement and social services agencies to encourage more victims to seek help, according to Farrell Cooper, executive director of the Partnership for Families, Children and Adults. All services, from filing a police report to retaining a counselor, will be available under one roof at the partnership office at 300 E. Eighth St. downtown, he said.

"It's a daunting task for a person who has been victimized to go to five or six different places and tell their story three or four different times," Mr. Cooper said. "We want to communicate openly, in a seamless way, where a victim can develop strength and power from the wrap-around support of the alliance."

Kate Murray, a survivor of domestic violence, said that when she left an abusive relationship 15 years ago she had nowhere to turn. She did know she no longer wanted to live in fear, she said.

"I knew I needed lawyers, I wanted counseling, and I had to file a report," she said. "It was stressful. It's a relief to know this place is here now."

There are many crimes linked to domestic violence, according to Chief Steve Parks of the Chattanooga Police Department. They include arson, kidnapping, vandalism, burglary and rape, he said.

"The more services working together, the better off the city is," Chief Parks said.

Hamilton County and Chattanooga together averaged 14 to 18 domestic homicides a year before forming the now-defunct Domestic Violence Task Force in 1997, records show. In the task force's first year, only two deaths were reported.

The task force was disbanded in 2001 because of a lack of federal grant money, and that year the number of domestic homicides soared to 10, records show. When the task force disbanded, domestic violence investigations fell back to the police department's patrol officers.

Officers then were hampered by limited resources and manpower, officials said.

The judicial system was even harder to negotiate, according to Charlotte Boatwright, president of the Coalition Against Domestic Violence. She said victims often gave up after repeatedly telling their stories to police, courts, legal aid, medical, transportation, housing, social services, mental health, rehabilitation and financial assistance professionals.

The fragmented system makes it easy for sophisticated offenders to slip through the cracks, Ms. Boatwright said. She said members of the alliance have worked together informally for years and plan to expand the partnership.

"We anticipate 30 to 40 entities to be part of this alliance," Ms. Boatwright said. "This is just the beginning."

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