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News Release

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Supervisors Unanimously Endorse Proposed Sonoma County Family Justice Center

District Attorney Stephan Passalacqua announced today that the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors has unanimously endorsed the concept of developing a Family Justice Center in Sonoma County. Last week's Board action on October 21st serves to move the process forward to identify a location, develop a detailed funding plan and establish a timeline for implementation of a Family Justice Center. The Center would serve victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and elder abuse, including disabled victims and house public safety partners including police/sheriff's officers, prosecutors, and community based advocates.

District Attorney Stephan Passalacqua said, "Families are the foundation of our community and the development of Sonoma County's Family Justice Center will increase the efficiency of public safety services and improve our ability to help those individuals who have been victimized by family violence. We are proud to work with a diverse coalition of community groups and appreciate the strong support of the County Board of Supervisors."

The core concept of a Family Justice Center is to provide a place where victims can go to talk to an advocate, plan for their safety, talk to a police officer, meet with a prosecutor, receive medical assistance and counseling, receive information on a shelter, and get help with transportation. The Family Justice Center model serves all victims, including those who do not enter the criminal justice system.

Over 40 individuals representing a wide array of additional government and community based organizations attended the Board of Supervisor's meeting yesterday in support of this effort including the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department, Santa Rosa Police Department, YWCA, United Against Sexual Assault, the Department of Health Services, the Human Services Department, and the Sonoma County Superior Court. The stakeholders presented the results of a completed feasibility study, which determined that establishing a Family Justice Center would effectively improve outcomes for victims of family violence in Sonoma County.

Denise Frey, YWCA said, "With the economic crisis this may not seem like the time to be launching a new initiative. But we know that the economic stressors we are experiencing will only exacerbate family violence issues in our community. The YWCA shelter has been full

since July --- we have never seen that before. Now is the right time to do this.”

The feasibility study revealed that, currently, once a domestic violence crime is reported, the victim may be referred to over 23 different locations to deal with law enforcement, prosecution and necessary services. The net result often is frustration and inability on the part of victims to follow through with important services. An additional and unfortunate result is the dismissal of cases when law enforcement and the prosecution are unable to secure critical victim testimony. Through a Family Justice Center model, the victim receives all the necessary support at a single location, which ensures the victim and justice are served.

Jo Weber, Human Services said, “Our experience has shown that when we consolidate services we get better results. This is also an opportunity to better serve victims by not retraumatizing them when they are forced to retell their story over and over.”

District Attorney Passalacqua said, “In life, there are small windows of opportunity. A Family Justice Center in Sonoma County would help keep victims safe, help hold offenders accountable, and improve service delivery and outcomes for victims.”

Comments from Members of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Supervisor Valerie Brown said, “Thank you to everyone who worked so hard to develop this and bring forward this proposal to establish a Family Justice Center. The proposal is indicative of how far we have come as a county and it is truly inspirational.”

Supervisor Mike Reilly said, “The coordinated approach advocated by the Family Justice Center concept is the way of the future.”

Supervisor Mike Kerns said, “I am in full support of this concept.”

Supervisor Tim Smith said, “Congratulations on the development of this new model. It fits squarely with the model of consortium development and upstream investment advocated by the County’s strategic plan. This preventative work will surely save the county resources downstream.”

Supervisor Paul Kelly said, “This is a home-run proposal.”