
B. Abstract/Proposal Summary

Comprised of urban, suburban, and highly rural environments, the County of Sonoma, California, is undergoing a significant demographic transition, resulting in an urgent need for major innovation in the delivery of comprehensive services for victims of family violence. In the decade between the 1990 and 2000 census, the population increased by 18% (from 388,222 to 458,614 persons). The county's population has continued to grow since the last census and was estimated at 479,929 in 2006, with projected growth to 542,214 by the year 2015.¹ Hidden within these figures is a social transformation that is changing the ethnic and social makeup of Sonoma County. Growing social and demographic pressures have forced government, community, and faith-based organizations to respond to escalating regional problems in new ways.

In spite of increased collaboration between law enforcement and community agencies, and the introduction of a number of innovative programs designed to improve the health and safety of victims, family violence² remains on the rise in Sonoma County. Police calls for domestic violence assistance have been rising steeply in the county, while decreasing statewide.³ In 2007, 44% of all domestic violence calls for assistance involved use of a weapon. Domestic violence cases represent the single largest source of cases booked in the Sonoma County Jail, comprising 74% of all misdemeanor cases and 54% of felony person crime cases.⁴

Responding to the urgent conditions facing family violence victims and their families, a broad coalition of county and community-based agencies, including law enforcement, judicial representatives, community-based advocates, and prosecutors, conducted an in-depth Feasibility Study in 2008 to evaluate whether the creation of a Family Justice Center (FJC) would be a viable strategy to combat family violence in Sonoma County. The Feasibility Study analyzed the extent of family violence in the county, the current service delivery system, and specific outcomes that could potentially be delivered by an FJC in Sonoma County. To our knowledge, the Feasibility Study, involving over 60 stakeholders, represents the most systematic effort conducted in the nation to date to assess the viability of a Family Justice Center.

Despite the many years of county and community efforts aimed at improving services for victims of family violence in Sonoma County, stakeholders interviewed and surveyed for the 2008 Feasibility Study confirmed that service delivery is still fragmented, hampered in part by the dramatic geographic dispersion of services and providers. Because of the large size of Sonoma County, the physical dispersion of the population and service providers makes it extremely difficult for victims to quickly and efficiently access the services they desperately need, often keeping them in prolonged jeopardy.

The overriding picture that emerged from the study, however, showed countywide efforts to effectively serve victims of family violence as being agency- and jurisdiction-focused rather than victim-centered, with no clear referral path or coherent system of collaboration existing between agencies. This translates into a precarious situation where the burden rests upon the victim to navigate her way through an uncoordinated system of essential services, at a time when she is especially vulnerable and often under acute stress and trauma. The study revealed that in

¹ Sonoma County Economic Development Board, "Sonoma County Economic and Demographic Profile, 2007-08," 2008.

² The term "family violence" refers in this proposal to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and elder abuse. Stakeholders involved in this effort include organizations active in all of these areas. Much of the data presented relates primarily to work with victims of domestic violence but applies, in most cases, to all of the areas covered by the term *family violence*.

³ Office of the Attorney General, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, <http://ag.ca.gov/cjsc/>

⁴ David Bennett Consulting, "Sonoma County, California Corrections Master Plan," December 6, 2007, Draft, Chapter One, page 25.

order to receive basic services and participate in criminal prosecution, a victim in Sonoma County may need to visit as many as 23 different locations to resolve her crisis, and end the cycle of violence in her life.

The fragmentation of the current system also impacts law enforcement outcomes. In 2007, 56% of total cases filed by the Sonoma County District Attorney's office were dismissed, with the majority of these dismissals resulting from victims not appearing in court.⁵ Recent outcome data from the Alameda County Family Justice Center indicates that the FJC approach to comprehensive service delivery creates increased victim empowerment, resulting in increased collaboration with law enforcement, and a reduction in dismissals for victim-related reasons.⁶

The Feasibility Study shed light on a flawed and fragmented system, but demonstrated that not only is there broad inter-agency and community support for the creation of a Family Justice Center, but that such a center could yield significantly improved victim health and safety outcomes, service improvements, and offender prosecution outcomes. In fall 2008, FJC representatives working with the County of Sonoma General Services Department were able to identify a potential location for the Family Justice Center that meets all of the stakeholders' criteria. On October 21, 2008, key stakeholders including the Sonoma County Medical Association, Kaiser Permanente, the YWCA, the District Attorney, the Sonoma Community Foundation, United Against Sexual Assault, and others presented the Feasibility Study to the County Board of Supervisors, who unanimously endorsed moving forward with making the Family Justice Center a reality.

The primary focus of the Sonoma County Family Justice Center (SCFJC) will be to provide victims with comprehensive, culturally competent law enforcement, health, and victims services at one location. The result will be strengthened advocacy systems for victims and better coordinated law enforcement, prosecution, and judicial responsibility. Responding to the tremendous urban, suburban, and rural diversity in the County of Sonoma, partners will create an innovative system, using secure video relay, to link the initial physical FJC, to be located in Santa Rosa (the largest urban center with the highest incidence of family violence), to the community clinic members of the Redwood Community Health Coalition located throughout the county.

Over the course of the 24-month grant period, the following primary goals will be realized: 1) Implement, monitor, and evaluate an innovative, comprehensive, direct services program for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse; and 2) Launch and sustain strong Family Justice Center logistical systems supporting program delivery. The initial focus will be the creation of the Santa Rosa-based FJC with subsequent expansion to incorporate a rapid video intake system, enabling victims in remote areas of the county to access the comprehensive services they need to end the cycle of violence in their lives and participate fully, if they so choose, in the prosecution of offenders.

Building on the platform established by their Feasibility Study, partners will incorporate a rigorous commitment to outcome tracking from the outset of program activities. *Efforts to Outcomes* software will be utilized by all partners from Day One of FJC operations, which will enable partners to collect, learn from, and disseminate empirical data regarding the impact of the Family Justice Center model.

⁵ Glen Price Group, "County of Sonoma Family Justice Center Feasibility Study," 2008 [Available Upon Request].

⁶ Alameda County Family Justice Center "Key Outcomes to Date," (Communication to the Senate Judiciary Committee of the State of California, 2008.)