

McTevia: Business Challenges Extend To Non-Profits

Women's center to close after 30 years

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The Women's Survival Center of Oakland County will close because of mounting debt, after almost 30 years of serving thousands of abused and needy women.

"In many ways, we have struggled to stay alive. But there's a day when you wake up and say, 'It's not responsible to keep doing this.' And responsibility is knowing when to close so you can eventually pay all your debts," said Sue Nine, president of the Women's Survival Center Board of Directors.

The board voted unanimously Monday to dissolve the Bloomfield Hills-based agency's operations immediately. The center - a nonprofit United Way of Oakland County partner - primarily helped victims of domestic violence and low-income women.

Since its founding in 1977, the Women's Survival Center assisted tens of thousands of people through its pro bono legal defense program called Personal Protection Order office, housed at the Oakland County Circuit Court; counseling programs; and child care center Maggie's Rising Stars in Pontiac.

Lately, the agency served about 10,000 people a year.

Nine said the financial difficulty stems from lack of funds for administrative costs. The agency had no problem obtaining grant money for programs but needed help with overhead, operations, rent and employee salaries.

But officials are working to move the agency's programs to complementary organizations within the community, so clients can receive support in a seamless fashion.

The Personal Protection Order office will most likely go to HAVEN, a nonprofit center for prevention and treatment of domestic and sexual violence in Pontiac. Families, children and staff of Maggie's Rising Stars child-care will relocate to three Pontiac child care centers.

And the pro bono legal services will be picked up by the Legal Aid Defense Fund in Detroit. The fund has a Pontiac office and will assume attorneys for the center, as well as handle all open cases, Nine said. The

Women's Survival Center handled up to 900 divorce and custody cases a year at no cost to the clients.

Most of the staff, about 14, can continue employment at the agencies assuming each of the programs.

Nine said that although the board considered dozens of options, closing is "fiscally responsible."

"The climate for fund-raising for all agencies has gotten so tight because of the serious economic condition in the state," she said. "It will cause lots of agencies to think about combining services."

It will take a minimum of three to five years before the Michigan economy is strong enough for people to use their discretionary income to support charities again, said Jim McTevia, managing director of McTevia & Associates in Bingham Farms. The company assists financially distressed businesses and nonprofit organizations.

"Certainly, in Southeast Michigan, where we are so dependent on the success or failure of the auto industry, one does not have to look very far to see the suffering is very, very deep," he said.

"Unfortunately, when people are struggling to pay their bills, mortgage and basic needs, they don't have funds available to donate to charities they would like."

Beth Morrison, HAVEN president and CEO, said the closing of the Women's Survival Center could put more strain on local agencies.

"Hopefully, other agencies will be able to pitch in and fill the void that's been left behind so (the closing) doesn't ultimately have a continuing negative effect," she said.

"A lot of services have had to wind down their operations. It doesn't mean they're not needed or that society doesn't deserve those services. It just means that services can't be provided by people who are also reliant to pay their bills," McTevia said. "It's a vicious circle that goes around."

But Lawrence Gardner, owner of Lawrence Gardner & Associates, a financial consulting firm in Troy that boosts fledgling nonprofits, disagrees.

Gardner said although it's more difficult now to garner money from individuals and corporations, it can be done with an innovative marketing plan that shows the importance of the nonprofit organization's services.

"The ones that aren't doing that aren't going to make it, no matter how beneficial the program may be," Gardner said. "You need effective leadership to dig deeper and present what your needs are, as opposed to business as usual."

Because of strict privacy policies, The Oakland Press was unable to speak with clients of the Women's

Survival Center.

Still, Nine gave an example of a common client.

"It's somebody who was beaten, (has) a child or two and (was) left bruised by the batterer. The batterer puts all her clothing in a garbage bag and takes it to work, thinking she can't leave home with nothing to wear. Women often turned up at our door wearing his hunting clothes and boots, with a baby in a blanket," she said.

"We are proud of what we did. We helped people make huge steps."