

St. Charles County **Business Record**

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St. Louis County included in new federal domestic violence program

St. Louis County is one of just six sites across the country taking part in a new federal initiative designed to change the way courts and social service agencies handle the complex, yet common, challenge of helping families facing both child maltreatment and domestic violence. As part of the initiative, child welfare workers, domestic violence advocates and family court judges from St. Louis County will coordinate their efforts in unprecedented ways to help violent families achieve greater safety. Partners in the St. Louis County Domestic Violence/Child Maltreatment Initiative, sometimes referred to as the Greenbook Initiative, include the Family Court of St. Louis County; Division of Family Services, Children's Services Division of St. Louis County; and area domestic violence service providers.

"For too long, we have approached the problems of domestic violence and child abuse as separate problems with distinct solutions," said Judge Susan Block, administrative judge of the Family Court of St. Louis County. "The reality is that domestic violence and child abuse are often intertwined. Those of us working to combat these problems must collaborate more closely to establish responses to domestic violence and child maltreatment that keep both women and their children safe. This initiative gives us the critical opportunity to develop those systems."

The St. Louis County Domestic Violence/Child Maltreatment Initiative will receive \$1.05 million over three years from the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services. Sites also receive technical assistance provided by the project's private partners, with funding

provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

This week, the St. Louis County Domestic Violence/Child Maltreatment Initiative hosted a National Conference at the Millennium Hotel (formerly Regal Riverfront).

The gathering was expected to draw 100-plus attendees who represented each of the six demonstration sites from around the country, national partners and a distinguished faculty. Domestic violence and child maltreatment are epidemic in the United States. An estimated 2.8 million children were reported as suspected child abuse or neglect cases in 1998, and more than 900,000 of them were confirmed as victims of child abuse and neglect. Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a 1998 Commonwealth Fund survey. These problems are often connected. A national survey of more than 6,000 families found that 50 percent of men who frequently assault their wives also frequently abuse their children; and the more frequent the violence against the woman, the more likely it is that the children are abused.

The sites will follow guidelines released last year by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in "Effective Interventions in Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment: Guidelines for Policy and Practice." The guide offers a comprehensive set of responses designed to eliminate or decrease the enormous risks that individual battered mothers, caseworkers and judges

must take on behalf of children. The guidelines were developed by leading family court judges and experts on child maltreatment and domestic violence under the auspices of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

"Too often, child maltreatment occurs in homes where one spouse is abusing another. Unfortunately, we don't have the systems in place to address these problems together," said Michelle Schiller-Baker, executive director of two shelters for battered women and their children. "Our purpose here is to bridge the gap between judges, child welfare agencies and domestic violence providers. We are hopeful that with a coordinated response to family safety, battered women will get the help they need without losing custody of their children and that children in the welfare caseload can be protected from the serious effects of domestic violence."

"The connection between domestic violence and child maltreatment is clear, and we can't hope to address either problem effectively in isolation," said Phyllis Hager, Division of Family Services program manager. "The reality is that domestic violence is pervasive in our child welfare caseload. With better coordination between our different agencies, we hope to find ways to keep children and, where possible, keep their families together. This initiative gives us an important opportunity for constructive change."

A national evaluation will explore how well sites are implementing the guidelines. The local evaluation will be conducted in partnership with the University of Missouri - St. Louis, with Dr. Mindy Mechanic, assistant professor, serving as the principal investigator.