

Vi West
Press Conference Mayor Herenton
Nov 2009

Shelby County Mayor A.C. Wharton stood solemnly in his blue silk tie, bowed his head and took a deep breath.

“Twenty years ago we looked ahead. We thought this would be a time when we’d say ‘I remember when,’ but we were wrong,” Wharton said, describing the chilling reality of domestic violence in Memphis and the absence of domestic tranquility permeating homes across the community.

The Urban Child Institute hosted the Operation Safe Community event to raise awareness about family and child abuse in Memphis. More than 600 organizations were represented, including the Family Safety Center, Memphis Area Legal Services and the Shelby County Crime Victims Center showcasing a wide variety of both profit and nonprofit organizations devoted to improving the safety of Memphis families.

Wharton addressed the media and local community supporters by announcing, “we should treat (domestic violence) as a perpetual emergency”.

The idea of the new domestic violence center is to take the concept of the highly successful Child Advocacy Center and apply it to the social problem of domestic violence, volunteers told guests. This approach will confront the issue of domestic violence in all areas - the home, the victim, the aggressor and the children – by making every resource available to victims all under one roof.

Laana Taylor, an advocate for the Memphis Sexual Assault Resource Center, described it as a collaborative effort meant to minimize the potential danger for victims and their families.

“This is an immediate crisis and a long-term crisis,” she said. “You can’t put a price on the lives I’ve seen touched by this epidemic and you can’t make it better if you don’t acknowledge the problem.”

As one of the volunteers leading visitors through a role-playing exercise, she explains the dangers complacency, noting that a situation can be fueled by multiple problems.

Behind Wharton, a banner shows guests the number of homicides related to domestic violence in Shelby County this year. From January to September, records indicate 32 lives were lost, including 10 children. This is already ten more than all of 2007 combined.

“No success anywhere can compensate for failure in the home” said Wharton, asserting the program’s initiative that the greatest change must come from providing relief for the children and families involved in the crisis, not just the direct victim of the assault.

District Attorney General Bill Gibbons stated that this program to raise awareness about domestic violence is “a true public and private partnership”.

ADA Karen Cook is the Chief Prosecutor for the city, and leads the struggle against domestic violence. Cook has spent the past two years on the Domestic Violence Unit where there were 3,972 new cases of domestic violence in the year 2007 alone, equaling over 10 new cases per day. Twenty-two of the 125 homicides were related to domestic violence, and 30% of the domestic violence aggressors had prior arrests.

“There is a problem holding defendants accountable and getting the resources out to the victims when they are first entered into the system” Cook stated, explaining the difficulties that the prosecution faces along with lack of a specialized court system allocated for domestic violence issues.

To aid the problem, officials expect to build a new facility for the Operation Safe Community Initiative program within the next two years. Possibilities include the total renovation of an existing property, in which case the program would be ready for implementation by next year, or a new structure in which the program won't be complete until 2010.

The City Council will convene downtown at the courthouses next Tuesday at 3:30 to consider the amount of city and public funding that will be allowed for domestic violence programs. They welcome public support.