'Response' time

Program could serve as a model for other shelter facilities

BY MICHAEL W. SASSER
Staff Writer

For Angela Diaz-Vidallet, Victim Response Inc. and its unique Miami campus, The Lodge, is the culmination of a dream that has been in development over the course of the well-known Miami figure's 30 years in social services.

"This is the pinnacle of what I want to do in the field," said Diaz-Vidallet, C.E.O. of Victim Response Inc. "I don't think there is anything in this field that could top this type of work."

Diaz-Vidallet has a lengthy history in the social service field. For years, she worked for various Miami-Dade County departments and other agency's social services components. Much of her experience was in working with perpetrators of domestic violence and rape. Today, she remains arguably the most progressive shelter for victims of abuse and their children in Miami-Dade County.

"Setting both sides is tough," Diaz-Vidallet said. "However, this work is very rewarding and we have plans to expand what we do."

Diaz-Vidallet said that Victim Response Inc. is the official name of the organization and that it has a larger goal than the service it already provides.

"The purpose of the corporation was that we want to do more than just The Lodge," Diaz-Vidallet said. "This is our first program and involves victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Although many don't realize it, there is a relationship between the two. Many victims of domestic abuse are also victims of sexual assault."

In the latter case, however, society and even the law sees the situation differently.

Eventually, Diaz-Vidallet would like to see Victim Response Inc. become involved in additional programming, such as for victims of other crimes.

"I would like a program to focus on survivors of homicide attempts, for example," Diaz-Vidallet said.

But for the time being, Diaz-Vidallet said The Lodge component of Victim Response Inc. has been tremendously successful in terms of being able to assist women – and men – in crisis.

The Lodge is housed on a former nursing home site in the heart of Miami-Dade County; obviously, its exact location remains guarded. A sprawling campus of green space, newly constructed buildings, an immaculate interior, a playground and other facilities add up to a full slate of services offered by a warm staff.

But the organizational structure of The Lodge is what makes it unique compared to any other similar facility in the county.

"This was a turnkey operation," Diaz-Vidallet said. "We wrote a grant and I left a comfy county job and after we wrote the proposal twice, [became the recipient]."

Miami-Dade County, through its Domestic Oversight Board, awarded Victim Response Inc. a three-year grant to operate The Lodge, with the possibility of renewal. Although the county is providing the basic funding for The Lodge, the government is not operating it. Rather, Diaz-Vidallet and her staff run the program.

"It does make a difference," Diaz-Vidallet said. "It has been a dream of mine to run a shelter after working with perpetrators for so many years."

Diaz-Vidallet said that Victim Response Inc. rents the property from the local government for $10 a year.

"We're government owned, but privately operated," said Diaz-Vidallet. "We do have an [oversight] board composed, which is something I am always scrambling to make, but otherwise the county has been extremely supportive. If this works out, we could well become a model for this type of facility and this type of public-private partnership."

The Lodge consists of 40 beds for women – and men – and their children. Also included are 10 cribs for infants.

"We get referrals from the State Attorney's office, rape counselors, law enforcement – even out-of-state women have been referred to us," Diaz-Vidallet said.

SOCIAL SERVICE: Angela Diaz-Vidallet, C.E.O. of Victim Response Inc., would like to see the organization become involved in additional programming, such as for victims of other crimes.

Program participants have 90 days – with an optional renewal period – to use a full slate of services in addition to being removed from their potentially dangerous domestic situation. Referred individuals could be escaping from an abusive same-sex or straight relationship.

"We offer day care, help with employment, counseling and other assistance through our community partners," Diaz-Vidallet said. "We have been filled to capacity since day one. We opened May 14, 2004 and have served approximately 300 people since then. More than half of those served have been children."

It is the children, Diaz-Vidallet said, that make the most impact on her.

"The children are the hardest part," she said. "There is so much work to be done to get through the layers of violence and abuse."

Included among their community partners are area hotels.

"We do have rooms, but we can't house them here, so we do at local hotels," Diaz-Vidallet said. "They receive the same services and are like outreach clients."

But hotel rooms are also used for overnight when demand for beds exceeds availability.

The program gives those in crisis a chance at making a life for themselves.

"If a woman is working, for example, this gives her three months to put money away while we take care of day care, we can help find housing, and even have a fund to help those who need housing with deposits and that sort of thing," Diaz-Vidallet said.

It is that transition period – from shelter to re-engagement in a fulfilling life – where today's social service network falls short.

"There is very little transitional programming of any kind," Diaz-Vidallet said. "There is a real lack of transitional housing."

Diaz-Vidallet said she is pleased that Victim Response Inc. has been able to assist many former clients re-integrate into society.

The scenic setting of The Lodge, the immaculate condition of the facility and the slate of services offered surprises and impresses "Laura" (not her real name), a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her lover several years ago.

"The shelters that were available then were atrocious and the people supposedly helping you treated you … well, like children or like we were feebleminded," said Laura, who said she spent months in several shelters and programs before finally being assisted not by government – but because one social worker put her in touch with a church in her community. Life has gotten better for Laura but she gives no credit to the social welfare system in Miami-Dade County of several years back.

"I got help because one person took an interest, stepped back from just doing her job and did me a personal [favor]," said Laura, who had a 3-year-old at the time. "Left to the system, God only knows what would have happened to us.

"People in situations like I was in need better programs than what [local government] offers," she said. "They don't care and I think that's a big part of it. It's just work for them. You want to help people, you have to care."

Care is what Diaz-Vidallet and The Lodge has to offer, but assistance is always needed. She said The Lodge could use both volunteers to assist in various roles and donations of a host of goods.

"Harley-Davidson is sponsoring a ride in April to benefit Victim Response Inc., which we think is great," Diaz-Vidallet said. "But we always have needs and could use community support."

For more information on Victim Response Inc. and/or The Lodge, call (305) 493-1170.