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ERIE COUNTY

Federal grant to spark Family Justice Center

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Victims of domestic violence are often a fragile lot. Abuse from their intimate partner often affects every other aspect of their lives - physically, mentally, financially. Many find themselves grappling with issues of drug abuse, poverty, child care and custody.

For these people, advocates say, getting the resources they need to move out of a violent situation often requires layers of agency assistance that many battered victims don't have the skill or will to navigate alone.

But by this time next year, all that is expected to change.

Erie County was one of only 15 counties in the nation - and the only county in New York State outside of New York City - to win a \$1.1 million federal grant this week that will allow for the creation of a new Family Justice Center.

"This is unbelievably huge," said Lisa Bloch Rodwin, chief of the District Attorney's Domestic Violence Bureau. "We've been working on this since 2000. Oh my God, I just can't believe we got it!"

The center will house almost everything a domestic violence victim would need - from police and legal services to counseling, child care and public assistance - under one roof.

Susan Davidson, coordinator of the county's Council on Children and Families, said the county has already committed to providing the space for the center on the second floor of its downtown social services building at 478 Main St., between Mohawk and Court streets.

The 20,000-square-foot location will house representatives from 32 different community agencies and county departments. In this one location, a victim

should find some unexpected touches, such as access to a chaplain, on-site day care and a limited-use medical area where forensic and photographic evidence of abuse can be gathered, Davidson said.

Of the total \$1.1 million grant, \$150,000 is earmarked for Neighborhood Legal Services, the grant co-applicant that will be providing the civil legal assistance to domestic violence victims.

Lt. David Mann, commander of the Buffalo Police Sex Offense Squad, said he expects the new center will not only provide a help to victims, it will enable the police to better investigate domestic violence crimes.

The county beat out more than a hundred other applicants for the federal grant, administrators said, a testament to the area's integrated community approach to handling of domestic violence crime.

The new center, which county officials expect to have renovated, staffed and operational by next summer, will be patterned similarly to the county's one-stop Child Advocacy Center created in 1994 to help sexually abused children.

The goals of the new Family Justice Center will be the same for domestic violence victims.

"What we're hoping," Rodwin said, "is that they'd be willing to trust us to get them to a point where they can be safe."

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