

Allegany County Domestic Violence Consortium meets at Alfred University

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ALFRED -- The Allegany County Domestic Violence Consortium and Rural Justice Institute of Alfred University held a planning meeting Wednesday on the AU campus to discuss ways to improve services to victims of domestic abuse. Representatives of county social services agencies, civic leaders and members of the law enforcement, education and health care professions were in attendance. The Consortium met last June to identify issues and problems the county faces in responding to the problem of domestic abuse. Kelly Beil, director of the Family Development Division of the ACCORD Corp., explained that Wednesday's meeting was aimed at addressing those issues and problems. Those attending the meeting broke into smaller groups, discussing how various areas of service in county could be improved to better address the needs of domestic violence victims. The following areas of service were addressed: The Legal and Justice System. Terry Parker, Allegany County district attorney, said there is a need streamline services to victims of domestic violence. One way that can be accomplished is by the use of an integrated domestic violence court, in which a domestic violence case with a criminal component is brought before one judge in one proceeding. "This creates more efficiency and better protects the interests of the victim," Parker commented. He added that a "response team" made up of officers from police departments in the county could be put in place, responsible for directing criminal cases involving domestic violence to the integrated court. Social Services. Peg Cherre, commissioner of the Allegany County Department of Social Services, said her group identified several problems, including a general lack of public awareness of the problem of domestic violence as it exists in the county and the services that are available to victims. "We decided what we need is a massive community outreach and media campaign," Cherre commented, explaining that public service announcements on television and radio and billboards could be utilized. The group discussed seeking the assistance of the communications studies program at Alfred University, with students helping develop and implement a media campaign. Elder Abuse. Dan Washburn of the county Office for the Aging said that cooperation between agencies that serve the elderly is viewed as a strength, his group identified some areas in need of improvement. Washburn said increased training for the law enforcement community relative to domestic violence and its impact on the elderly population, as well as an improved system of data collection, are among the short-term goals identified. Education. Dr. Sally Dorman, director of operations for the Rural Justice Institute at Alfred University, said her group discussed ways to improve the lines of communication between schools in Allegany County and service providers. Short-term goals include developing an outreach program for schools by which school personnel can report incidents of domestic violence and determining a list of contact people at each school. Longer-term goals include creating awareness training and prevention programs at schools and developing liaisons to work between the schools and the agencies that serve domestic violence victims. Health Services: The group discussed the need to train health care practitioners on domestic violence laws. Health care professionals, Beil noted, can play a major role in the successful prosecution of domestic violence cases. "We'd like to form a subcommittee specific to health care issues," Beil said. "We need to survey training (as it relates to domestic violence response and referral) available to health care providers and educate them on the services available" to victims of domestic violence. Churches. Pastor Mark Chamberlain of the Angelica Bible Church said his group spoke of the need to open the lines of communication between church officials and agencies serving domestic violence victims. Should churches become aware of incidents of violence occurring in the homes of parishioners, they should be aware of the resources available for consulting victims and making referrals to the appropriate agencies. "We need to get the information about those resources into the hands of the pastors," Chamberlain said.