

Rock Island County Safe Passage Program

Rock Island County is located in the western portion of Illinois along the Mississippi River. Rock Island, the county seat, is a part of the Quad Cities, which also includes Moline, Illinois and Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa. According to the US Census Bureau, the 2004 estimated population for Rock Island County is 160,141 with a land area of 458 square miles. In 2004, 686 Emergency Orders of Protection, 9 Interim Orders of Protection and 288 Plenary Orders of Protection were entered into the Law Enforcement Administrative Data System (LEADS).

The following information was gathered through an interview process with local key stakeholders describing the formation, procedures and needs of the Rock Island County Safe Passage Program. The following people were interviewed for the purpose of this report:

- **Honorable Lori Lefstein**, Circuit Judge, *14th Judicial Circuit*
- **Karen Relf**, Supervisor, *Bethany for Children and Families*
- **David VanLandegen**, Director, *Rock Island County Court Services*

Development of the Rock Island County Safe Passage Program

In the late 1990's the chair of Churches United, an interdenominational faith-based group in the Quad Cities, and the Director of Prairie State Legal Services approached Judge Lori Lefstein about establishing an exchange center for families with domestic violence issues and high conflict divorces. The group was familiar with a program in Davenport that used a church and trained volunteers to facilitate exchanges.

Judge Lefstein invited a number of community members to a meeting to discuss the possible need of a center where a committee was established to implement an exchange program. The committee included probation, attorneys, Churches United, Prairie State Legal Services and various social service agencies.

It was determined that an exchange center could not be funded through a filing fee on civil cases due to insufficient support from the Rock Island County Board. Therefore, the committee had to seek out alternative funding. The committee received a \$6,000 start up grant from two local foundations, the Doris and Victor Day Foundation and the Rauch Family Foundation. The First Baptist Church in Rock Island agreed to act as the site for the exchange program and volunteers were recruited to facilitate exchanges every other weekend. The program was named Rock Island County Safe Passage Program and it opened in fall 2001.

In 2003, Safe Passage approached Bethany for Children and Families in Moline to administer the program. At the same time the program in Davenport, Iowa, Family Connection, also asked Bethany to administer their program. Now, each site operates every other weekend, on alternate weekends, which allow families to use a safe exchange center 52 weeks per year. Currently, Safe Passage serves appropriately 24 families a month.

Program Administration

Bethany for Children and Families administers the Rock Island County Safe Passage Program.

Site/Location

The Illinois site is located in Rock Island at the First Baptist Church, while the Iowa site is located in Davenport at the Newcomb Presbyterian Church. Each exchange center has two separate entrances and parking lots that are accessed by the custodial and non-custodial parents. Hours for the exchanges are Fridays from 5:30 p.m. to 6:15 p.m. and Sundays from 4:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., depending on which center is being used. Families are assigned specific time slots for arrival and departure and are directed to adhere to that time schedule. The two centers are available on alternate weekends, 52 weekends per year. Families may use either or both sites, depending on when their exchanges are scheduled. Weekday exchanges are available as well, and are facilitated in both the Moline and Davenport Bethany facilities.

Security

The Rock Island County Safe Passage Program has no security on site and staff use walkie-talkies or cell phones to communicate between the front and rear entrances. Staff has a cell phone to call 911 if necessary.

Funding

In 2006, Bethany received a grant from the Iowa Department of Human Services and the United Way, enabling them to assign staff time to the development of the Rock Island County Safe Passage Program. Additional small grants also assisted with the funding of Safe Passage. Prior to the grant, Bethany was operating Safe Passage with no outside funding.

A registration fee of \$25.00 is paid by the non-custodial parent along with a \$5.00 fee for each exchange. Typically, the receiving parent pays the fee.

Bethany has liability insurance that covers the exchange program.

Staffing

Two full time employees of Bethany with additional responsibilities oversee the Rock Island County Safe Passage Program. The two employees and many volunteers staff the actual exchange sites. Volunteers must pass a background check and agree to be fingerprinted. In addition, they receive training from Bethany staff on domestic violence issues and what types of situations to expect.

Protocols/Procedures

Types of cases

Many of the cases are court ordered, but families are not required to have a court order to participate in the Rock Island County Safe Passage Program. The parents contact the agency to set up an intake interview and bring a copy of the court order or divorce decree with visitation requirements, if applicable. Parents wishing to use the center for exchanges, who are meeting resistance from the second parent, can petition the court to issue an order specifying Safe Passage for exchanges.

Procedures

Intake

- Parents are interviewed separately before an exchange schedule is set up and complete intake forms that list basic contact information.

- The interview includes a discussion of rules including fees, the cancellation process, expectations of parents, a statement of client's rights, grievance procedures, and a detailed outline explaining the exchange process.
- Each parent is given copies of the policies and procedures and sign off that they have received them and agree to abide by them.

Exchange Process

- On Fridays, the non-custodial parent arrives ten minutes before the exchange and always enters through the same door, signs in with the volunteer, shows photo ID, pays the \$5.00 fee and waits for the child.
- The custodial parent arrives with the child through a different door at the time of the exchange, signs in with the volunteer and signs the Exchange Record with the time of arrival.
- Two volunteers take the Exchange Record and walk the child to the other side of the building where the non-custodial parent is waiting.
- The non-custodial parent signs the Exchange Record and leaves immediately with the child.
- The custodial parent remains for ten minutes after exchange.
- Parents are instructed not to loiter or remain at the exchange site.
- This process is repeated on Sundays in reverse.
- If there is any indication of drugs or alcohol, the staff will cancel the exchange.
- If a parent is more that 15 minutes late the visit may be canceled. It is the option of the parent if they want to continue to wait.
- If the child is not comfortable and does not want to go with the other parent, the staff may cancel the exchange. The philosophy is that they are there for the child so they will try to do what is best for the child. The Bethany staff member will make the final decision.

Records and Reporting

Safe Passage does not have a formal reporting process with the court but, when requested, a record of exchanges is submitted. If either parent does not show up for the exchange it is documented on the exchange report. Incident reports are filled out on the exchange report when necessary and could include behaviors such as being late, intoxication, etc.

Other services provided

Bethany for Children and Families is a child welfare agency that provides counseling services, a mediation program, supervised visitation and parent education groups.

Data Collection

The Rock Island County Safe Passage Program collects demographic information on families, which includes, but is not limited to, age, income, race, county of residence and marital history.

Advisory Committee

The Rock Island County Safe Passage Program has an advisory committee that meets quarterly and is composed of representatives of the community including a judge, law enforcement, adult probation, the Child Abuse Council and child welfare agencies. The Advisory Committee provides information on possible funding opportunities, trends they see in the community and Safe Passage staff keeps them informed regarding issues relating to the Program.

Promotion/Marketing

A Rock Island County Safe Passage Program brochure is provided to the court for distribution to parents. Staff periodically attends roll call at the law enforcement departments in Rock Island County to explain the service and pass out program brochures and business cards for officers to distribute to parents. In addition, staff will be making a presentation to the Rock Island County Bar Association.

Needs

Rock Island County Safe Passage Program staff would like the opportunity to meet with other Exchange Centers to learn more about the processes and procedures at other sites in order to continue to improve Safe Passage.