

Proposal for supplementary Rutherford County Court Advocacy Support - September 2014

Domestic Violence Proposal for Court Advocate Position \$27,900

The Domestic Violence Program began as a small satellite program of the Nashville YWCA Shelter. The agency was chartered in 1986, and quickly provided a full range of victims services. Today our agency offers safe, residential shelter, legal assistance and court advocacy, counseling and support groups. Chancellor Whitney Steagall gave us the distinction of having Petitioners for Orders of Protection, come to our offices to prepare initial court filings in 1989.

We opened our new residential shelter in 2003. In March of 2007 our agency assumed responsibility for the operation of the Rape and Recovery Agency in Murfreesboro. Our agency became a true dual issue program, adding a second rape crisis hot-line, hospital accompaniment for rape victims, and individual sexual assault therapy. All of the services provided by our agency are confidential and free of charge. The Domestic Violence Program provides equal employment opportunities and provides all services to clients without discrimination. Our agency's services are overseen by our very active volunteer Board of Directors who meet every other month and who reflect the diversity within our community. They provide policy, oversight, and financial support for all phases of our work.

This supplemental funding request targets the needs of victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking in Rutherford County who are seeking assistance in obtaining civil Orders of Protection and court advocacy as part of their safety plan for their families.

The current application seeks funding to hire an additional court advocate in our agency. Our program currently has a full time para-legal, a part-time court advocate, and part-time attorney on staff. Since 1990 the Rutherford County Courts' 'local rules of court' stated that victims of domestic violence can have a Domestic Violence Program advocate with them in court and our court advocate staff was able to summarize cases on the docket for the judge. This arrangement was substantially modified in meetings in 2006, with our presiding judges, where it was expressed that our agency needed to have victims represented by counsel. Attorney Mitch Shannon has been hired to work with our advocates to provide free legal representation to those victims seeking Orders of Protection in Rutherford County.

Responsibilities of our requested court advocacy position include assisting the victim to understand the court process for obtaining an Order of Protection, assisting them in filing their Exparte Order of Protection, preparing clients for their court appearance, working with family members, and providing emergency services for the petitioner. Staff compile all required data base statistics.

The new position requested would have a starting salary of \$10.90 per hour, be hired full time with FICA taxes of \$1,735 and benefits of \$1,002 which includes Workman's Compensation, unemployment compensation, and a \$640 annual medical benefit. The proposal also includes \$600 for cell phone compensation and \$1,000 for training and travel. Total request is \$27,900. The effectiveness of our agency's court advocates and attorney can be seen not only in the number of orders represented in our judicial system, but also on how well plaintiffs understand the process and the high percentage of plaintiffs who attend their court dates.

This is much easier for victims and saves the courts time. We work closely in collaboration with our the Domestic Violence Court staff, Legal Aid Office, and our Circuit Court clerks. Additionally, in collaboration with the Domestic Violence Court staff and concurrent with pending Orders of Protection, the new employee will be providing advocacy to victims going through the criminal court process. Often victims are confused and don't understand the process of prosecuting their abuser. Confusion and fear by the victims of domestic crimes result in failures to appear in court or recanting their story when it matters most.

It is the mission of Domestic Violence to provide the best possible advocacy to victims both in civil and criminal court. This new position will allow one of our advocates to be present with the victim in both General Sessions and Circuit court to provide support and education of the proceedings. The new position will assist in tracking criminal cases through the court process to provide the Special Advocate with necessary information as to how and when to proceed in the civil Order of Protection case.

Victims of domestic violence are more likely to be successful when they are supported in their efforts to leave abusive relationships and achieve a more secure future for themselves and their children. Victims are more likely to follow through with judicial remedies when advocates continually support victims through all phases of prosecution.

The Domestic Violence Program's proposal is a direct service initiative for very low to moderate income victims in Rutherford County. The project focuses on victims seeking separation from an abuser and left in emergency situations due to his actions. During the period of our ongoing support, the victim faces enormous challenges: dealing with lack of transportation, finding day care, filing Orders of Protection, attending hearings, completing safety plans, seeking new employment, applying for housing, arranging medical care for herself and her children, and dealing with vandalism and stalking. Meanwhile, as the woman holds the batterer at bay and perceives herself as being safer, she is more isolated and financially dependent than before. Both our local Criminal Court and Civil Court advocacy efforts are essential to victims becoming productive, independent families again.