

A call to help shed light on abuse

A select group of Oak Park and Tahoe Park residents will ask their neighbors what they know.

By Christina Jewett -- Bee Staff Writer

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The problem affects every neighborhood in America yet is so private that often only hidden bruises or private tears reveal it.

On a recent Monday, Faye Kennedy spoke openly in the Oak Park Community Center about domestic and child abuse.

She charged six community members with the task of surveying Oak Park and Tahoe Park residents to determine what people know and need to know about the issue.

"We recruited you -- now it's your turn to go out and do the work I've been doing," said Kennedy, director of the Center for Collaborative Planning, a Berkeley-based organization funded by the Public Health Institute.

Kennedy has been asking questions since July, learning what residents of Oak Park and Tahoe Park think are the root causes of abuse and if they know where victims can turn for help.

That way, Kennedy said, light will be shed on why abuse occurs in each community.

"We're looking at the issue from a totally different perspective," Kennedy said. "We're empowering the community members to get involved."

The effort is the second phase of what the Center for Collaborative Planning named the Call to Action. Per the plan, residents won't focus on telling people how to recognize child abuse: looking for repeated marks and bruises, especially near the head and neck. And they won't tell people where to turn: Child Protective Services, (916) 875-5437, or Women Escaping a Violent Environment, (916) 920-2952.

Rather, the idea is to tap into the roots of a problem that varies from community to community.

"We believe the community members hold the power to make changes," Kennedy said.

Sheila Anderson, executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Sacramento, said the council tracks data that allow people to see whether child abuse problems on their street are tied to crib deaths, bathtub drownings, neglect or other problems.

"These are such volatile issues that without data, it's easy for people to come up with solutions that are not tied to reality," she said. "Giving people real, factual information is a powerful first tool."

Anderson said her group works with a child death review team that can break down data, block by block, throughout the region. Based on the causes of trauma, she said communities can pinpoint risky practices and educate residents on how to avoid them.

On Tuesday, the council planned to release a detailed look at the problem countywide.

Anderson said the average citizen is not equipped to jump into the middle of a dangerous situation.

But people can learn to spot risk factors and make an informed report to Child Protective Services, contact a home visitation coordinator or recommend a parenting class.

"We all feel very comfortable if we see someone in the elevator smoking to say, 'Please put that out,' " she said. "How many know what to do in the grocery store when they see a parent behaving inappropriately to a child?"

Kennedy said the next phase of the Call to Action will involve pairing community groups with grants so they can bring educators -- like officials with the prevention council -- to speak to their groups.

Doris Cooper of Oak Park is raising five young grandchildren and teaching Sunday school at Paradise Missionary Baptist Church, 3651 27th Ave. "I hope to have some effect on my home and community," she said.

Kennedy said Oak Park and Tahoe Park were logical places to make the Call to Action since they are separated only by Stockton Boulevard and could benefit from further collaboration.

Liz Sterba, director of the Tahoe-Colonial Collaborative for Healthy Children, said she's pleased to work with Kennedy on the project.

"People in abuse situations don't come forward with it," she said. "That's what attracted us to the program -- looking at how can we work with the community to stop that silence."

MORE INFORMATION

You can call the Child Abuse Prevention Council at (916) 244-1900 or view www.capcsac.org.

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