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ALAMEDA COUNTY
New center opens for domestic-violence victims
17 agencies on site offer help services

- [Kelly St. John, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Alameda County opened Northern California's first one-stop center for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse Wednesday, and officials said they hoped the center in downtown Oakland would revolutionize the way victims were treated -- with the ultimate goal of preventing future violence.

The Alameda County Family Justice Center, one of 15 such centers nationwide funded by a \$1.2 million federal grant from the Department of Justice, is aimed at giving domestic violence survivors the law enforcement, legal services, rape-crisis services, health care, educational services, job training and even spiritual services they need in one user-friendly place.

Such victims in the past had to go to several different places to get help, said officials who lobbied to open the center. That meant they not only went through the frustration of having to retell their stories -- exacerbating their trauma -- but they also often missed out on services that could have helped them.

"This is a concept whose time has come, that the professionals work around the victims and not the other way around," said Nancy O'Malley, chief assistant district attorney for Alameda County, who led the effort to open the center.

State Attorney General Bill Lockyer, who addressed more than 100 people gathered at the opening ceremony for the center Wednesday, said the idea "should be universalized."

It is the kind of place that Latarya Coleman said could have helped her. She was 24 years old and the mother of two young sons when her estranged husband broke into her home, shot her point-blank in the head and turned the gun on himself.

Coleman survived, but she did not realize how much the ordeal had affected her young sons, Keon and Kenneth, until by chance an employee at a Hayward housing agency referred the family to the Domestic Violence Education and Screening program at Children's Hospital Oakland.

Her son Keon didn't see the shooting, said Coleman, now 27 and living in Atlanta, "but one

day, while he was at school, he forced another kid to eat grass. He started acting out in a violent way. Inside, it was taking a big toll on him."

Shelley Hamilton, management coordinator for the Center for Child Protection at Children's Hospital, worked with Coleman and her sons for nearly a year and said they were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Families fall through the cracks because they simply don't know what to ask for," Hamilton said. "Keon kept reliving the story, but there was no one for him to tell it to. The way it came out for him was through anger."

After going through the program for a year, Coleman said, her children are well-adjusted.

The 17 on-site agencies under one roof at the Family Justice Center include the district attorney's office, the sheriff's office, the Alameda County Medical Center, Bay Area Legal Aid, Bay Area Women Against Rape, Children's Hospital and Research Center and the Family Violence Law Center. More than 30 other agencies will also serve as off-site partners for the center.

The building -- located at 470 27th St. in Oakland -- has a children's play area, an Internet cafe and private telephone rooms for local calls. About 90 workers are on-site and can help victims with a wide range of services, whether it is filing a civil restraining order by fax, conducting a forensic interview in a child-abuse case or giving consultations on clothing and hair before a job interview.

As many as 6,000 Alameda County families may use the center's services, O'Malley said.

In 2004, there were 229 felony cases and 1,986 misdemeanor cases of domestic violence in Alameda County's criminal courts, according to Alameda County Superior Court Judge George Hernandez.

Where to find more information

For more information on the Alameda County Family Justice Center, go to the center's Web site at <http://acfjc.org/>

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Kelly Sedgwick, supervisor of the Family Law Division of Alameda County, looks at the "Kids Zone" in the new Family Justice Center. Chronicle photo by Michael Macor



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