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Center loses federal funding

Safe Havens may close without grant

By NICHOLAS LEDDEN
The Daily Inter Lake

The expiration of a federal grant may force the Nurturing Center to close its Safe Havens Visitation and Safe Exchange program by the end of the month, agency officials said Monday.

The program has been funded since its October 2005 creation by a \$289,798 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Violence Against Women.

But the grant expired Aug. 31, and the Nurturing Center missed the deadline to renew it.

As a result, the program may be forced to shut its doors by Oct. 31.

"At this time, I have not secured adequate funding to sustain the program," said Nurturing Center director Susan Christofferson.

The Safe Havens program offers monitored visits between children and a parent who otherwise may not be allowed to have contact with their child.

"Our services are designed to strengthen families based on the philosophy that if families are strong and healthy, it results in a better community," Christofferson said.

Approximately 57 families with 91 children, ranging in age from 3 months to 19 years, currently use the program.

"It's going to be a huge and sad loss," said Family Court Services director for the 11th Judicial District and Columbia Falls Mayor Jolie Fish.

"It's going to be so difficult for parents and their children to understand why they can't see each other," said Fish, adding that very few agencies in the Flathead Valley provide this service.

Use of the visitation and exchange center often focuses on such problems as a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental-

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Center needs to raise \$75,000

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health problems or abduction concerns.

"We use it almost on a daily basis," said Flathead County District Court Judge Stewart E. Stadler.

If Safe Havens closes, it will also eliminate a safe place for parents who have been removed from or left the home because of allegations of domestic violence to visit with their children.

"Safe Havens created a safety net for primary and secondary victims of domestic violence with a facility that focused on the developmental needs of the children and a safety protocol and security system to reduce the risks," Christofferson said.

FLATHEAD COUNTY has one of the state's highest rates of reported domestic violence.

"We are concerned about the risk to both women and children when they close," said Janet Cahill, director of the Violence Free Crisis Line, whose organization partners with Safe Havens.

Sometimes the program is used when no contact between parents is desired by one or both parents. If a lengthy separation of children and parents has occurred, meeting within the Safe Havens environment can help re-establish

the relationship.

Jamie Wandruff, of Kalispell, used the program throughout the summer of 2006. It provided a place for her children to see their father while a restraining order was in place.

"We grew back together as a family again," Wandruff said. "They need to stay open for families like mine."

The Nurturing Center must raise about \$75,000 to keep the Safe Havens program running until new grant funds become available in about a year, Christofferson said. And a new petition for the U.S. Department of Justice grant will be filed in February, she added.

A \$160 donation would support supervised visitations for a family for a month, Christofferson said.

To donate, call the Nurturing Center at (406)756-1414 or visit the Web site at www.nurturingcenter.org.

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