

A new beginning for families

Domestic violence shelter unveils apartments

Posted by the [Ocean County Observer](#) on 03/5/07

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Deb Bottomley, a caseworker for Dottie's House, shows off one of nine new apartments that will house victims of domestic violence and their children. The \$1.6 million addition was built with support of government, business, community and private individuals.

Katie Cosenza, a survivor of domestic violence and graduate of Dottie's House, put it best.

"No one deserves to live a life where they're made to feel worthless or feel like garbage," Cosenza said.

The 26-year-old was one of several guest speakers who attended an open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the new \$1.6 million addition to Dottie's House.

The addition is comprised of nine additional apartments for survivors of domestic violence and their children. It includes two- and three-bedroom apartments and one studio; two are handicapped-accessible. There is also a multipurpose room, individual counseling rooms, a job training room and an art therapy room.

The facility first opened in 2001 with eight apartments.

The transitional housing program is located at an undisclosed location in Ocean County; it is designed to empower women to be emotionally and financially independent.

Cosenza said her ordeal "was not easy and not for the faint of heart."

"I grabbed on to the teachings of Dottie's House," said Cosenza. "It gave me a sense of worth. I gained the self-confidence that I can make it on my own and that I deserve a violent-free life. I'm self-sufficient and take care of my daughter. I am a very smart and capable young woman."

Cosenza told the audience not to use the word "victim."

"In these walls, you become a survivor," said Cosenza. "This program has been a rock for us."

According to Dottie's House case worker Debbie Bottomley and program director Deborah Galletta, Ocean County has the fourth highest incidence of domestic violence in the state.

If a woman experiences domestic violence for the first time, she often thinks that her partner will change. The abuser often promises that it will never happen again.

"Statistics show that it's a repetitive cycle," Bottomley said. "Our goal is to have women become self-sufficient, break the cycle of violence and provide a better life for their children."

The addition marks a new beginning for nine more families, Galletta said.

The journey from victim to survivor is painful and difficult, Galletta said. The progress made by the women enrolled in Dottie's House is "nothing short of remarkable," she said.

Carol Wolfe, founder of Dottie's House, told the group of businesspeople, politicians and private citizens that they each played a role in making a dream come true.

"The furniture, glasses, sheets — everything was donated by the community. Every dollar, every dish. It came from the heart. We live in a nice place and have lots to be grateful for," Wolfe said.

The statistics of domestic violence are "terrifying," she said.

Nearly one-third of American women report being physically or sexually abused by their partner at some point in their lives, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In nearly 44 percent of the cases, children were either victims or witnesses.

The elderly are also at risk. In 2005, eight female senior citizens were murdered in domestic violence incidents in New Jersey, Wolfe said.

While other facilities in Ocean County aid women who experience domestic violence, none do it quite like Dottie's House.

For example, no other facility in the state offers a 24-month program. Each client and their child has their own apartment at Dottie's House. Services including job training and placement, counseling, parenting classes, financial management, legal advocacy, and day care, to name a few.

The new addition was built with the support of government, business, community and private individuals. Major financial contributors included the state Department of Community Affairs Shelter Support Allocation, the OceanFirst Foundation, the FirstEnergy Foundation, New Jersey Natural Gas, Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church of Rumson and the township in which the facility is located.

If you are a victim of domestic violence, call (732) 262-2009.