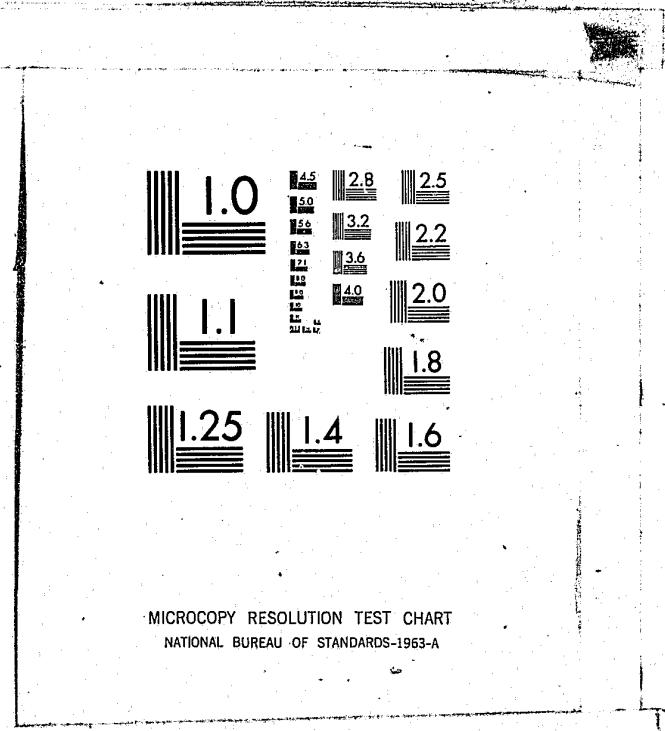


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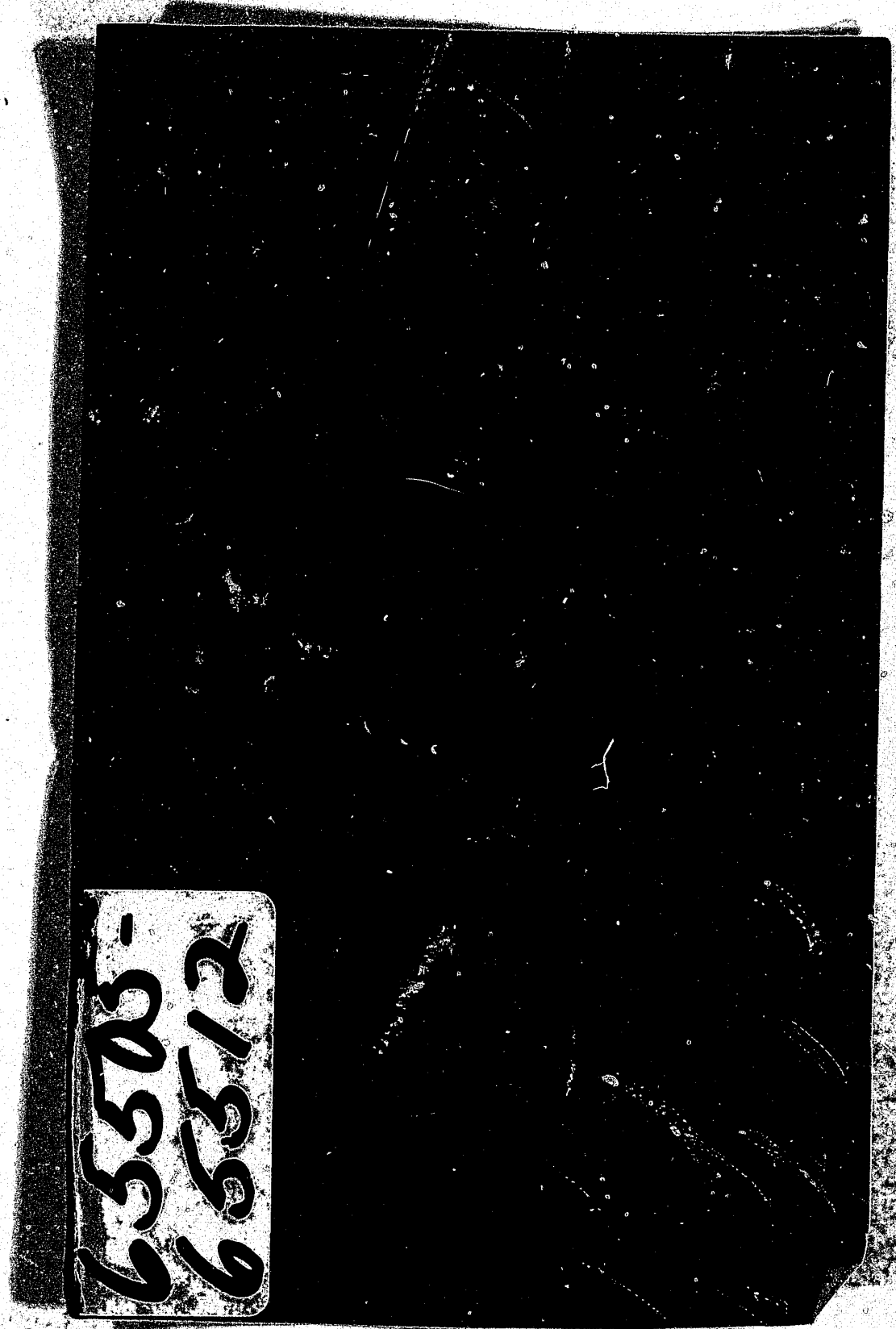
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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, 1978

HEARINGS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
CHILD AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION
ON
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND LEGISLATION WITH RESPECT TO
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.
MARCH 4, 1978
WASHINGTON, D.C.
MARCH 8, 1978

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X -SHELTER:
A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

Presented to:
Child and Human Development Subcommittee
Washington D.C.
March 8, 1978

Cheryl Beardslee
Staff member
Women's Advocates
584 Grand Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota

Historically, women beaten in their own homes have been seen as recipients of justified punishment, participants in a private fight or masochists. As a result there has been little help given to assist abused women in changing their situations; more likely, responses to requests for help leave abused women feeling more responsible, more at fault.

In the past few years shelters have developed in response to the unmet need for safety for abused women and their children. Women's Advocates shelter in St. Paul, Minnesota opened in October of 1974. In the past three and one half years we have housed over two thousand women and children, while forced to turn away three out of every four families who request housing. I will share with you the development of one shelter created in response to the plea of women in St. Paul for a place to seek shelter with their children, to escape the fear and violence in their homes; and the development of a program continually defined by the women -- and the children -- for whom it exists. In doing so, I share with you not only our own experience, but that of the growing network of shelters developed by women across the country who at last initiated a response based on the right of each woman to control her own life, respecting and nurturing her own sense of what needs to be done to change her situation.

In 1971, with no intention of developing a shelter, a consciousness raising group decided to begin work that would be supportive to women. They began a telephone service designed to provide women with information about their rights in the area of family law. Women's questions about what they could do to get out of violent family situations spurred a search for available options. Legal options available to a woman in

an abusive relationship only presented increased danger, since she was expected to live with her assailant while proceeding against him in the courts. Possible sources of shelter were explored; the only emergency housing provided for a woman with children was a night or two in a run-down hotel provided by Emergency Social Service. Nearly every call from a woman who had been abused would begin with "you're going to think I'm crazy", or "you're not going to believe this". In previous calls for help or attempts to get support she had most often been discounted for exaggerating or told she was to blame for the violence. It was clear that she needed a safe shelter, time, and people who would believe her, validate her experience, and trust her so that she could begin to trust herself to make decisions for herself and family.

Women's Advocates incorporated as a Minnesota non-profit corporation in April 1972 and began reaching out to the community for financial support through letters and eventually a newsletter. As individual donations were received a small office-apartment was rented providing a bedroom for housing and office space for the phone service. Volunteers began housing women in their own homes. By continuing the phone service and beginning to meet the need for shelter, Women's Advocates was able to document the problem of woman abuse in St. Paul and demonstrate that emergency housing created an alternative for women living in violent homes.

The documentation and demonstration of an alternative were crucial in the search for funding over the next two years. In 1974 Women's Advocates received grant-in-aid money for salaries from the State Welfare Department, followed by private foundation money for a downpayment on a house and its rehabilitation. Program money then became available from private foundations and the local mental health board.

When we opened the house in October of 1974 there were not enough beds and there was no food. We were confident that women working together had the resources to solve any upcoming problems. No preconceived policies or procedures had been set out. House policies and procedures have been continually developed through decision making processes involving residents, staff, ex-residents and other members of Women's Advocates work groups. We had begun operating a shelter based on the belief that women could define a space and a program that would meet their needs. Three and one half years of experience have strengthened that belief. In our shelter and other shelters across the country programs for battered women gain strength and clarity through processes in which residents, staff and boards cooperate to constantly redefine their programs.

Advocacy for an individual woman is the process of helping her reach goals she determines for herself. The success of our shelter depends on that process. When a woman has the opportunity to make her own decisions about her life she gradually begins to see herself differently. She feels sane, capable and worthwhile. She sees herself as someone who deserves to be treated well; with a right to not be beaten.

Our work with community agencies focuses on ways in which they can provide services that will facilitate a woman's opportunity to make her own decisions. The welfare department is one example. When we first opened, women had to pay us room and board out of their own pockets, leaving little money for personal needs and none to find suitable housing after the shelter. Work between Women's Advocates and the welfare department has resulted in the creation of a vendor system for emergency housing. The county now pays a per diem for room and board for a family, leaving the woman with the financial resources to decide when she wants to leave the shelter and where she wants to live. We also worked with

the welfare department to develop consistent procedures so that the woman has control over who knows her whereabouts. Frequently, a search for a father for the purpose of collecting child support means a new seige of assault for a woman and her children.

So far, I have mentioned children only in connection with their mothers. . . When we first opened we considered children to be the mother's responsibility and we focused on helping her. We soon learned that children share the mother's fear, insecurity and lack of self-esteem. We made efforts to help children as we carried on our program with mothers and gradually decided that we needed child advocates. We now have two staff positions for child advocates. Though most of the children who come to the house have not been the direct targets of abuse, the fact that they experience the affects of violence toward their mothers makes them victims and means they have special needs. The child advocates have worked with the public schools, head start, and child care coordinators at the city, county, and state levels to see that the special needs of children are met not only while they are at the shelter but after they leave as well.

Other community agencies we have important relationships with are the police, Family Service, Community Planning Organization, Legal Assistance, and the county mental health center. We depend on the city police to provide protection for us and they depend on us as a referral source for women in domestics they respond to. Women's Advocates shares a chemical dependency counselor with Family Services. The Community Planning Organization provides a resource library on battered women and cooperates with us in community education efforts. Workers at the Ramsey County Mental Health Center refer women to our support groups and we use them as a referral source for women who want on-going counseling. Legal Assistance has worked out a system whereby a woman who has been physically abused can be seen on an emergency basis. We are also involved in

educating our community, and our legislature to facilitate the passage of legislation which would protect battered women wherever they are and provide funding for shelters.

Though we're now primarily supported by public funds; the county mental health board, the welfare department, and a grant through our state's shelter legislation our budget is not met. We must continually prove our need to present funding sources and seek new sources at the same time even though programs for battered women are in the limelight. There are groups of women all over the country who are ready to open shelters when funding is available. We all need funding that will be stable and will continue when some other social concern captures the public eye. The most pressing funding problem we've faced is the difficulty in obtaining capital funds for building, equipment and furnishings. Throughout our existence we have had to rely largely on private donations for capital investments. Private donations were the only way we were able to construct a fence to improve our neighbor realtions.

Our relationship with our neighborhood is important to mention because it has been relatively smooth. Our arrival in the neighborhood went unheralded. We are licensed as a room and board facility and located within an area already zoned to permit room and boarding houses. In the three and one half years since our arrival we have received complaints from neighbors about the noise of children and children in their yards. We have taken such complaints seriously and negotiated solutions to the problems. Angry men have confined their threats and harrasment to the house itself and our relationship with the police helps provide the immediate response we need to prevent threats from becoming assaults.

Our success with our neighbors and with agencies is a visible, objective quantity. The success of the program for women who use it is more elusive. There are objective ways we measure our success. Women who stay at the house experience safety from abuse and fear. That is success. Some women who have stayed at the house maintain contact with us and we hear about others so we know what changes they've made. We want to know more about what happens to women and their children once they have left the shelter but tracing families when they leave takes time and money that we don't have. Subjective measures are also important to us. The way a woman looks and what she tells us about how she feels are the day to day feed back that tells us whether or not the house helps her meet her needs. We have been careful not to define the "successful client". Each woman knows best what she needs to do for herself and her children and only she knows if she has succeeded.

I have talked a lot about providing an opportunity for women to take control over their lives. I want to erase any implication that that will solve the problem. It is not true that she is responsible and if she would only act the problem would be solved. At Women's Advocates we have heard from and/or housed women who were beaten by attorneys, doctors, business men, elected officials and police officers as well as women beaten by men who are laborers or underemployed. One researcher estimates that 50% of the women in the United States experience physical abuse. As a society we have an obligation to look not just at the individuals involved in violent families but at the ways our institutions support violence against women as an acceptable part of family life. Until we have made some real changes in our cultural view of the family, shelters are a necessary and immediate alternative to living in a violent home. Women and their children have a right to such an alternative.

END