

Treating batterers hot topic

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It came as a shocking surprise a few weeks back as Butte-Silver Bow Commissioner Laura Lee Dunlap, the only woman on the council, argued against the local government signing a short-term contract with Community Counseling and Correctional Services (CCCS) to provide counseling for individuals convicted of spousal or partner abuse.

The contract, to cover May and June was for about \$3,000.

Commonly called batterers, the men (although some women are classified as batterers) are generally fined, jailed, at least overnight, ordered to pay fines and costs and ordered to counseling.

Dunlap, and even, perhaps more surprising, Tonya Geraghty, who direct the battered women's shelter, Safe Space, say the batterers should pay full freight for the counseling service. To do otherwise, they argue, in part, is to, in a sense, reward the batter with a free service while no comparable service is available to victims of domestic abuse.

Actually, at the commissioners' meeting at which the matter was discussed, Commissioner Charlie O'Leary raised the objections to the contract and was joined by Dunlap.

However, after the discussion, Commissioner Mike Kerns pointed out that O'Leary opposes everything that CCCS proposes because of a vendetta by O'Leary against Mike Thatcher Chief Executive of CCCS because Thatcher voted to censure O'Leary for an apparent conflict of interest in the early 1990s.

The major flaw in the argument that the batterers pay is two fold, according to County Attorney Bob McCarthy. First of all McCarthy said, batterers in upper socioeconomic circumstances are generally given suspended sentences upon completion of counseling and are able to pay for their counseling. Second, he said, individuals in less fortunate economic circumstances can't afford to pay for counseling and, in general, would not comply with the counseling requirements unless court ordered to do so.

But, all batterers have one thing in common, McCarty said, "About 96 percent of them return to the home and, thus, have the potential to continue their behavior. Also, there is more of a chance they will repeat if they don't have counseling."

The counseling is expensive and, at least now, Butte-Silver Bow has no one on staff either at the health department or the office of victims' advocacy. So, Butte-Silver Bow was asked to pay for the service for two months from CCCS.

Actually, CCCS has been providing such counseling to Butte-Silver Bow's court-ordered cases for some time, for free.

But, CCCS Executive Director Mike Thatcher has said the free service from his organization can't continue indefinitely because of the costs CCCS has incurred in training counselors, the costs of paying counselors and the administrative costs of the program.

State law provides in part: "The offender (batterer) shall complete a minimum of 40 hours of counseling. That counseling includes a preliminary assessment for counseling. The counseling may include attendance at psychoeducational groups...in addition to the assessment. The preliminary assessment and counseling that holds the offender accountable for the offender's violent or controlling behavior must be: with a person licensed under state law, with a professional person as defined by law or in a specialized domestic violence intervention program."