

Advocates shelter back from the ashes

■ Ozaukee home for victims of domestic abuse reopens five weeks after fire damaged building, displaced residents

By **CAROL POMEDAY**

Ozaukee Press staff

On Tuesday, March 12, clients, employees and board members of Advocates of Ozaukee watched helplessly as firefighters from five departments battled an electrical fire that started in the attic of the shelter for victims of domestic violence.

A shelter employee smelled smoke shortly before 6 a.m. and got the 12 clients — eight of whom were children — out of the building to safety. No one was hurt and all but four clients, who went to a hotel, were taken to other shelters.

On April 19, five weeks after the fire that caused extensive damage to a second-floor bathroom, bedroom and hall and smoke and water damage throughout the rest of the structure, the shelter reopened. All rooms have a fresh coat of paint and new carpeting was donated by Home Depot.

“It looks phenomenal,” Executive Director Barb Fischer said. “You have to look at it as a silver lining. We had the opportunity to clean and paint and get things looking really nice — better than before the fire, to be honest. It’s hard to do much when you’re full all the time.

“The community really stepped up, like it always does. To be in a community like this is awesome. We felt loved and cared for.”

Now, it’s time to restock the pantry, said Barbara Bates-Nelson, executive director of United Way of Northern Ozaukee.

Red bins have been placed at Sanfilippo’s Sentry, 101 N. Seven Hills Rd., Port Washington, for people to donate items.

“All the cereal and spices had to be thrown away,” Bates-Nelson said. “They need personal care items, paper products, everything to run a shelter.

“It was such a traumatic situation. These women and children had already fled their homes for temporary shelter, and now they were uprooted again.”

The shelter is most in need of paper products, cleaning supplies and grocery gift cards for perishable foods, Fischer said.

“The canned goods in the basement are fine, but anything that was in the cupboards had to be tossed out,” she said. “All the paper products had to go, and we used up all the cleaning supplies.

“We didn’t have electricity, so everything in the refrigerator and freezer was lost.”

Fischer said Bates-Nelson was the first of many people to ask, “What can we do to help?” United Way of Northern Ozaukee gave the agency \$500 to help with repairs.

Advocates board members and other volunteers organized work parties and area businesses donated items, Fischer said.

Many things, including mattresses, had to be thrown out and some items still need to be replaced.

Advocates’ office is in a separate building on the property, so all operations were moved there. Phone calls were answered, Fischer said, and those who needed a safe place to stay were referred to other shelters. Counselors met with clients at other locations.

Since the shelter reopened with the four clients who were in the hotel, it has been full, Fischer said.

It was also full the day of fire. Fischer credits the employee working that morning with saving lives and confidential records.

“Luckily, everybody got out fine,” Fischer said. “There was no smoke, no alarms went off. She just smelled something burning and decided to get everybody out.

“She did a fantastic job. Not only did she get everybody out, but she remembered to bring the case files and reference books. She did a phenomenal job, but I’m not surprised. She’s a really good worker.”

Fischer said the clients who went to other shelters were invited back, but most had enrolled their children in schools and didn’t want to uproot them again.

Last fall, Fischer and the Advocates board asked the community to donate money, gift cards and supplies because of the heavy demand for services and cuts in state funding and grants.

The shelter was full or near capacity

through most of 2012, when the number of clients doubled. Last year, clients stayed 3,068 nights in shelter compared to 1,838 nights in 2011.

Clients are staying longer and need more services and supplies due to the length of the economic downturn, Fischer said.

Not only has the economy put pressure on families that often leads to an increase in domestic violence, but the financial help women once got from family and friends appears to be dwindling, she said.

“The ones who could rely on families for medications and personal items are finding the families don’t have the means anymore,” Fischer said. “We have to supply those incidents.”

The largest increase in clients is those age 18 or younger who have suffered sexual, verbal or physical abuse, Fischer said. Because counselors go to the children’s homes or meet with them in schools or other places, the fire did not interrupt those services.

In addition to donating items at Sanfilippo’s Sentry in Port, checks, gift cards and vouchers may be sent to Advocates of Ozaukee, P.O. Box 80166, Saukville 53080.

The Advocates hotline number is 284-6902 or (877) 375-4034. The office number is 284-3577.

More information is available at www.advocates-oz.org.

Ozaukee
PRESS