

Domestic violence shelter on track to make facility improvements

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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The McKinley County Domestic Violence Shelter for Battered Families received a much-needed financial boost to make improvements to its facilities, which have not had any substantial upgrades in many years.

On Dec. 8, county commissioners approved the ability to administrate \$90,000 in funds made possible by the Legislature earlier this year. Since Battered Families is a nonprofit organization, its executive director, Emily Ellison, said it needed a government agency to act as a fiscal agent so that it could utilize the money. A motion by the commission on the matter was approved unanimously.

“Battered Families is an incredible organization. It’s done some good work and I hope that it will continue to do good work,” Ellison said. “It needs help in the areas of buildings; our buildings are old and antiquated.”

Asked when the improvements would be completed, Ellison did not give a date, saying a company would first need to be approved to do the work.

According to Ellison, the problems her facilities face are vast. The administrative building has mold, necessitating abatement and a roof replacement. The shelter itself is not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act; and water and electrical infrastructure need improvements, too.

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These are all issues previous Battered Families executive directors have been seeking improvements for over the last 15 years, according to Ellison.

Ellison suggested that the shelter might be able to make the needed improvements for \$90,000.

“We advocated for this,” she said, noting the funds came together during the most recent legislative session by working with the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Linda Siegle, government relations for NMCADM, praised the commission’s approval, noting she visited the shelter several years ago.

“It needed work then. It’s good that they’re fixing it,” Siegle said. “Gallup has a definite need for an expanded shelter.”

Despite less-than-ideal conditions on site, Ellison’s nonprofit has been able to fulfill its duties as a domestic violence shelter since March, when the pandemic began to rage.

The 16 employees that work for Battered Families have followed CDC guidelines, including frequent hand sanitizing, wearing personal protective equipment and maintaining social distancing. Desks are separated by plexiglass because of COVID-19 protocols and staff stagger their shifts due to the facility’s mold issues.

Ellison said the shelter does not have enough rooms for Battered Families to follow CDC guidelines, so families have been put up in nearby lodges that can accommodate health and safety needs.

She noted how Battered Families has been limiting new clients since the nonprofit organization identified mold. Improvements made possible by the funds would “allow us to go back to normal

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capacity, operating as if it was a safe building to work out of,” Ellison said.

Ellison also touted providing other services, such as legal advocacy, during the pandemic. She talked about how one family was granted a protective order, child custody and support — all via teleconferencing within the court system.

Siegle said COVID-19 has “really exacerbated domestic violence” in part because survivors feel the typical avenues for relief — including shelters — are not safe from the coronavirus.

Ellison agreed.

“A lot of our clients are single mothers, and so, with the stress that they’ve been through they’re needing a lot more support, whether it comes from their family or the Battered Families counselors,” she said, noting the nonprofit is working to help clients provide for the cost of food, rent, and mortgages. “The stress that they face is a multitude and we work to help them take each of those obstacles step by step, so they’re able to understand what’s in their control and what’s not.”

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