

Independence House expands role in community

By Cynthia McCormick

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HYANNIS — Independence House started as a grassroots organization whose founders were determined to use the lessons learned in the women's rights movement to protect victims of domestic violence.

The nonprofit agency celebrating its 40th anniversary this year runs a plethora of services for survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, with a focus on prevention, said Executive Director Lysetta Hurge-Putnam.

Long known for providing court advocacy and counseling for adult and teen victims as well as a 24-hour hotline, Independence House has expanded programming in recent years to provide counseling for victims of sexual assault between the ages of 5 and 12.

About three years ago the agency also opened a shelter for victims of domestic violence at an undisclosed location in Barnstable County.

In some ways, the shelter program is the agency going back to its roots.

Independence House opened a shelter in 1981, but closed it after one year, according to newspaper articles in the Times archives.

The organization instead relied on a network of "safe houses" across the Cape to temporarily house victims — mainly women and their children — fleeing their abusers.

"When I started, we had safe houses, which we will still have," said Hurge-Putnam, 58, who has led the organization for the past 20 years.

Safe house stays are typically very short — one to five days — while the average length of stay in the shelter is six months, Hurge-Putnam said.

The emergency shelter, which can accommodate up to seven families and a total of 12 people, including children, "is always at capacity," she said.

"We need more capacity," Hurge-Putnam said. Independence House also offers transitional housing that allows survivors time to get on their feet, she said.

Hurge-Putnam came on board at a time of internal strife at Independence House, shortly after a group called Citizens Concerned for the Future of Independence House called for the agency to be more accountable to employees and the public after the firing of two social workers.

Low key and cheerful — though passionate about her work — Hurge-Putnam has been lauded for leading the organization into a stable future.

"Lysetta is just amazing. She and her staff have brought the organization to where it is now," said Donna Zayatz of Cape Cod Five, treasurer of the Independence House board of directors.

"She's just done a fantastic job," Zayatz said.

Recent initiatives include working with coaches and athletes at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School to develop a program that recognizes healthy relationships and discourages bullying.

The message is "you can set the tone," Hurge-Putnam said.

"We're moving beyond awareness" to prevention, said Hurge-Putnam, who has been married 29 years and has a 23-year-old daughter.

Independence House also is collaborating with the Cape and Islands District Attorney's office and the Cape Cod Immigration Center to train police on trauma-informed interviewing of victims.

"Our staff right now is very diverse," Hurge-Putnam said. Of the 50 employees, more than 12% are people of color or people from Brazil, she said.

Independence House also is collaborating with CORD, the Cape Organization for the Rights of the Disabled, to address the heightened risk of sexual assault faced by people with disabilities, especially mental disabilities, Hurge-Putnam said.

Sexual assault "is a big problem, whether it be from caretakers or peers," Hurge-Putnam said.

"They're vulnerable, and they're not always taken seriously," she said of victims with disabilities.

"It's such a natural collaboration to work together on this project," said Cathy Taylor, director of services for CORD.

Independence House staff brings a level of expertise to the often overlooked issue of sexual assault of people with disabilities, she said.

"Independence House is a great resource," Taylor said.

"It comes down to the fact the organization saves lives," Zayatz said. "They help victims and their families get their lives back."