

# Economy, Violence Linked?

## Legal, Shelter Service Providers Say They're Struggling To Meet Need

By **PATRICK COOLEY**  
*Daily News-Record*

**HARRISONBURG** — Domestic violence has always been a problem in this area, said Anne Mauldin, a domestic violence staff attorney for Blue Ridge Legal Services in Harrisonburg. But since the economic downturn began more than two years ago, she said her office has seen it only get worse.

"What is the number one thing couples fight about?" asked Melissa Waite, a social worker with the First Step Domestic Violence Shelter in Harrisonburg. "Money," she answered.

They tend to see more fights when money is scarce, Waite said.

And to make matters worse, women and children who are being abused by men are more reluctant to leave their abuser, because they don't think they'll be able to find a job or a new place to live, Mauldin said.

"A lot of times they wait until things get really bad," she said.

As a result, Mauldin said, the cases of domestic violence in her office over the last two years have become

steadily more severe.

According to its records, Blue Ridge, a nonprofit legal service that works with low-income families, has worked with 100 clients since the beginning of the year. Mauldin said this only represents the number of clients the agency has been able to work with. In some cases, attorneys are forced to turn victims away because their situation isn't severe enough, or they don't identify themselves as domestic violence victims when they call for help.

A financial instrument known as Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts helps fund legal services for the poor, such as Blue Ridge. But those investment returns have been falling steadily since the economic downturn began — dropping 20 percent nationally since 2007, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Mauldin said federal stimulus funds were able to recoup some of the lost money, but Blue Ridge may be forced to reduce its staff when that runs out next year.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and to bring attention to this issue and help local service agencies, the Harrisonburg-

Rockingham Domestic Violence Task Force awarded two grants from the Rockingham County Commonwealth's Attorney's Office earlier this month. First Step received one of the grants, worth \$1,000 each, and Harrisonburg's Center for Marriage and Family Counseling received the other one.

One of the many services the center provides is a supervised visitation program for parents who have lost custody of

their children.

"This gives [children] a chance to continue their relationship with that parent in a supervised environment," said Kathy Connelly, a supervised visitation coordinator at the center.

"We see a cycle of children brought up in violent homes, seeing themselves brought up as batterers," said Ben Cline, an assistant commonwealth's attorney. Cline works on juvenile and domestic violence cases.

"You try to make the violence in their family go away," he said. "But you also have to give them the tools to deal with it."

“What is the number one thing couples fight about? Money.”

■ Melissa Waite,  
social worker, First Step  
Domestic Violence Shelter

## Helping Hand



Michael Reilly / DN-R

Ben Cline, a Rockingham County assistant commonwealth's attorney, presents grants to: (from left) Luanne Bender Long, executive director of the Center for Marriage and Family Counseling; Melissa Waite, First Step Domestic Violence Shelter social worker; Kathy Connelly, visitation coordinator, CFMFC; and Christine Spilman, licensed counselor, CFMFC. The grants, worth \$1,000 each, were made through the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Domestic Violence Task Force.