

# Volunteers provide friendly counsel to those who seek protection orders

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE  
SPECIAL WRITER

In Room 101 of the Oakland County Courthouse, as many as 20 people a day are reduced to writing the reasons why they live in fear of someone else.

They are petitioning the court for personal protection orders to keep out of their lives someone they believe will harm them, and perhaps their children.

The majority are in some sort of abusive domestic relationship. But stalking, disputes between neighbors, landlords and tenants, or co-workers can also prompt someone to seek legal refuge.

"I told her (the secretary in the next office) I would bring her Kleenex back," says one petitioner, who has moved from tears to determination in the course of the hour it has taken to fill out the personal protection order she received at the court clerk's office.

Some of her resolve is due to sympathy and knowledgeable help in filling out the petition. Helping her resolve is an understanding of the procedure given by Kathy Purdy from the Women's Survival Center, and helping Purdy are trained volunteers from the metro-Detroit chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.

"Lots of people come in very upset and unfocused," said

Eileen Terman, whose regular volunteer shift is Monday morning. "They have to be able to put their thoughts on paper. It's their only communication with the judge. We're there for them and we're not unfocused."

A major question on the petition is: I need a personal protection order because... "They might just say 'he was abusive,'" Terman explains. "We tell them they have to be specific — where, when, how."

It's been a year and a half since a grant from the Women's Survival Center made it possible to dedicate uninterrupted time to the more than 3,000 people each year who file for personal protection orders. Before, it was just one more responsibility of the clerk's office.

## 20 percent male

"I was surprised when I first began working here to find out that 20 percent of the people are men," says Purdy. Although some people come in on their own, others are there as a result of police referrals. "The ones that got to me are the ones that involve children. Not that they're always in danger, but they're in that situation."

"I got a real nut case after me," a well-dressed, confident appearing woman announced, as she entered the room, the form for a personal protection order in hand. "My life's not been my own

for the past couple months."

She says a man she was forced to evict from retail property she owns has been stalking her. Most recently he left a dead animal on the doorstep.

That propelled her to the courthouse. "This has gone far enough. I'm not going to take it anymore. I can't back off from him. But I can't be afraid to leave my house for the rest of my life."

As she filled out the form, she took note of another woman who was filing in a case of domestic abuse. After that woman left, she remarked: "I can't imagine what it is to live with a guy who you think is going to kill you."

But even in her own situation, she said: "It's the most alone feeling — the feeling of isolation and abandonment. The courts are here, the police are here and somebody loves you, but still you feel you're just out there by yourself."

A Birmingham woman, whose son was assaulted by another teen, went to a court weekend where the assailant and his dad showed up at her door and she received threatening phone calls.

First thing Monday morning, she was at the courthouse. "I got an order out for my entire family," she said. "They (the people in the PPO office) helped me fill it out. I took it to the clerk's office, the referee and then went up to the judge's

courtroom. He read it over and signed it. It was kind of a neat learning experience."

"I felt like I got it on record," she said, but the fear took longer to dissipate. "We were so paranoid for the first month. It disrupted our whole lives. I got MAD. I got a personal alarm and a pager. It's a shame for a person to do that to you."

A personal protection order must be filled out, filed with the clerk's office, assessed by a referee, and then decided on by a judge — now one of the judges from Oakland County's new Family Division of Circuit Court.

"It used to be 17 (circuit) judges doing them 17 different ways," says Bill Bartlam, deputy clerk of Probate Court. Now, one of the seven family court judges decides on each personal protection order in more uniform fashion.

The whole process "could take hours or it could take 15 minutes," says volunteer Terman. As for the decision, "It's whether the judge feels you're in imminent danger or not." The order is enforceable as soon as it is signed by the judge.

## Notification a must

The person on whom the order has been taken out must be notified, by court server, registered mail or in person. Then, the petitioner must follow up to make sure the court clerk has notified

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—volunteer

his or her local police or sheriff's department and has entered it onto the LEIN — the computerized, Law Enforcement Information Network.

Last August, the Women's Survival Center did a follow-up on people who had taken out personal protection orders to see how the system is working. Unfortunately, they have not had the staff to collate their results.

But both Bartlam and Lois Brooks, coordinator of follow-up services at the survival center, have a sense that it's working well. "Their ppo has worked for them and they haven't been bothered," Brooks said, describing the majority of her follow-up calls.

"The feeling is yes, they save lives," Bartlam agreed. "They are a method of getting before a judge right away."

Still, he said, legislation is pending that will better define how a personal protection order should be used. The definition of stalking is too broad, Bartlam says. "Sometimes people try to use it to cover areas it isn't designed for."

## Protection requests keep clerk's staff busy

Employees at the county clerk's office are kept busy distributing personal protection order petitions — sometimes as many as 20 per day.

In 1997, 3,171 PPOs in Oakland County were granted. So far this year, of the 875 PPOs requested, 734 have been issued.

"The main reason a PPO will be denied is because of insufficient allegations," Oakland County Deputy Clerk Lisa Ceyz said. "In stalking cases, for example, we require two documented incidences and many people will only have one."

After the PPO is filed, one of eight referees assesses the petition and makes a recommendation to a judge from Oakland County's new family division of circuit court.

Most PPOs are issued in stalking and domestic cases, Ceyz said.

"We have had a wide variety of cases come through," Ceyz said. "There's been cases between landlords and tenants and co-workers. But, ultimately it's up to the judge to decide whether or not the person is, in fact, in danger."

Usually, a PPO is issued for one year but can be renewed if danger still exists.

A PPO violation carries up to 93 days in jail and/or a \$500 fine.

## Parenting seminar scheduled

Lecturer and author Anthony Wolf will discuss parenting issues at the 18th annual Alicia Joy Techner Memorial Parenting Conference 7:30 p.m. April 30 at Temple Israel, West Bloomfield.

Wolf, author of "It's Not Fair, Jeremy Spencer's Parents Let Him Stay Up All Night" and "Get Out Of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?" will discuss issues ranging from sibling rivalry to temper tantrums and reveal how parents can effectively set limits.

The lecture is free and open to the public. Alicia Joy Techner is the late daughter of David Techner, a funeral director at The Ira Kaufman chapel, Southfield, and his wife, Ilene Kaufman Techner.

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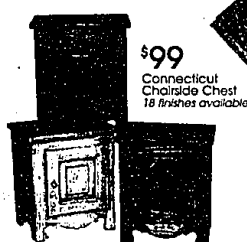
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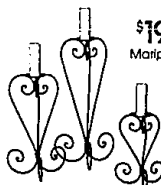
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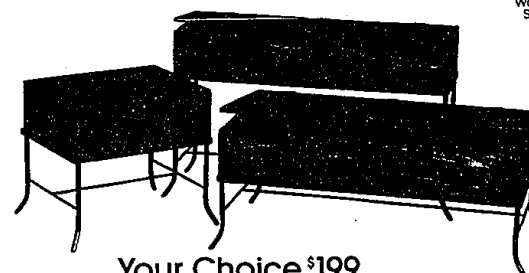
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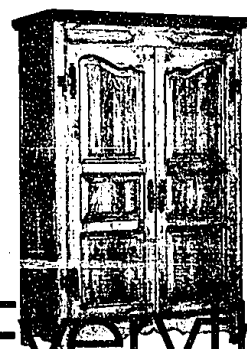
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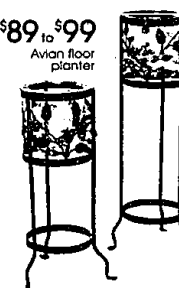


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