

County grappling with domestic violence

By Christy Allen

Special to Sentinel-Voice

While domestic violence in Richmond County, GA, is escalating to epidemic levels, victims must cope with a judicial system and police department that may be incapable of managing the problem effectively.

Domestic violence experts are concerned that the county will never be able to handle the problem without significant investment in training and streamlining its court system — neither of which it seems to be prepared to do.

"Law enforcement, prosecutors, solicitors, judges and the entire justice system need to be educated so they understand the dynamics of this cycle," said Nancy Nelson, director for the Domestic Violence Intervention Center of CSRA.

The number of victims contacted by the Richmond County solicitor's office reached 3,483 in 1997. That's

up from 750 in the previous year.

"These are just misdemeanors in which jail time does not exceed 12 months and the fines are under \$1,000," according to Amanda Gray, Domestic Violence advocate of the Solicitor General's office.

"Family violence should be taken as seriously as violence among strangers. Either way, it is illegal to attack anyone," she said.

The police must "take a stand and arrest these guys," Nelson said.

County officers may be severely handicapped by lack of training in dealing with domestic violence situations, Nelson fears.

Handling the situation incorrectly could have serious consequences for the victims of domestic violence, she said.

For example, she reports that county officers responding to a domestic violence situation often tell a woman that she, as

well as the aggressor, could be arrested. To a woman with children, the fear is that the children could be removed from the home.

"The lady who calls in fear of her life today may not call back tomorrow," Nelson said.

A woman who feels that she would not be able to care for her children might rule out contacting the law as an option, Nelson said.

Such police behavior is not only poor policy but may be outside the bounds of what is legal, she suggested.

"Continuous and effective training on how to handle family violence issues would greatly benefit the Richmond County Sheriff's Department," Nelson said.

Just how much training Richmond County Sheriff's deputies undergo is anyone's guess.

There was no one from the department to comment on training techniques at press time.

County deputies did, however, recently receive training on how to include more pertinent details on their domestic violence incident reports, according to Annette Ports, administrative assistant in the Solicitor General's office.

"We need to know if children were present, their ages, if alcohol was involved and the condition of the living quarters. These are vital facts that need to be assessed," Ports said.

Making more arrests in domestic violence incidents is a key to finding a solution to the problem, said Kim Davies, a sociology assistant professor at Augusta State University who teaches a course about violence against women.

According to Davies, studies have shown that more arrests make a greater impact. "It's all about our social and legal structure," she said.

Christy Allen writes for the *Augusta Focus*.

Race meeting turns ugly

Special to Sentinel-Voice

DENVER — A town hall meeting meant to smooth over race relations in a city recently plagued by hate crimes ran into potholes Monday night when Native Americans complained that President Clinton's race advisory board has excluded them.

Actor Edward James Olmos, a member of the town hall panel, said indigenous people of North America, including the Indians of Chiapas, Mexico, have been ignored for too long by the U.S. government.

"We're really not able to understand the root of this problem because indigenous people are not being given a voice," Olmos said. "The people of Chiapas and indigenous people in this room must be heard."

Judith Winston, executive director of the Race Initiative, angered the protesters when she said there was no room for them on the board.

"It was not intended to represent the composition of the United States, we can't have that with only seven people (on the board)," spokeswoman Lydia Sermons told the crowd.

Despite Energy Secretary Federico Pena's intervention, about 20 protesters, some wearing handkerchiefs and ski masks, refused to let board member John Hope Franklin speak, demanding to know why no Native Americans were on the board.

The meeting was organized as part of the President's Initiative on Race, in an effort "to help us become One America in the 21st Century."

The board had hoped to inspire dialogue, Sermons said.

African-American farmers take their land dispute to United Nations

By Akwasi Evans

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Representatives of Black farmers took their fight for economic justice to the United Nations recently.

John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association, delivered a petition to the body, March 18, requesting that U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan investigate widespread violations of their human rights.

"The country has enabled the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) to continue to discriminate against its customers," Boyd said. "This is a national crisis. They have stolen our land. They have taken away our livelihood. Now they are trying to take away our heritage."

African-American farmers have lost more than a million acres of land in the past half century and the erosion hasn't ended.

There are myriad reasons for this dramatic decline, but most say the primary factor is racism and the worst perpetrators are the United States government and the Department of Agriculture (DOA).

For decades Black farmers' claims of discrimination and unjust treatment went largely ignored. Claims made against local Farm Home Administrations (FHA) often went into USDA trash cans or were referred to the local FHA for evaluation.

Finally, in frustration, Black farmers banded together to file a class action lawsuit on behalf of the National Black Farmers

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— John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association

Association.

On March 5, 1998, Judge Paul Friedman granted the farmers a status hearing in federal court.

The case, Pigford et al. v. Glickman, asked the judge to decide whether the mostly southern Black farmers are entitled to government compensation for years of neglect, foot dragging, denial of loans and unjust foreclosures.

Allowing that time does impose hardships on the farmers, Judge Friedman set Feb. 1, 1999, as the trial date, saying he hoped the cases will be settled through mediation before then.

Last month, Friedman ordered both sides to enter into mediation in an effort to alleviate the farmers' concerns.

The biggest sticking point is the government's contention that all claims presented prior to 1994 are not recoverable and "not subject to monetary relief."

The plaintiffs disagree, arguing that because the government has continually taken steps to impede the farmers' suit, there should be no statute of limitation restrictions.

Such limitations, Pires argued, "create another form of injustice."

He accused government

attorneys of attempting to make the farmers "go through convoluted claims with artificial issues."

He said that 75 percent to 85 percent of all Black farmers with claims could be ruled out if the government's statute of limitations assertion is upheld.

Pires revealed that many farmers have complained but have not filed formal documents. And, he said, "foreclosures are occurring while farmers are trying to get the issue resolved and the government continues to sell from the inventory Black farmers are claiming."

Pires asked the judge to order an immediate moratorium on the sale of southern farm land until these claims are settled.

He also asked the judge to lift his stay so that his clients could proceed as a class with their suit.

"The cases are incredibly similar," he said. "Every farmer has the same elements. They have debt because of what our government has done to them."

Quoting a government official, Pires reported that the Department of Agriculture did not even investigate complaints to local offices. "Nine out of 10 claims were thrown away," he said.

While the government claims that thousands of cases

early trial date."

Agricultural Secretary Dan Glickman is committed to trying the case, his attorney stated. "But it is crucial for mediation to go forth," Sitcov added.

Court-appointed mediator Michael Lewis said eight mediations were conducted in February, but since then discussions have been halted. He also labeled the government statute of limitation claim "a real barrier," adding that it could possibly be "a smoke screen."

The Rev. Joseph Lowery, chairman of the Black

Leadership Forum, called upon all major Black organizations to support the Black farmers. He said his organization will approach groups like the NAACP and Urban League in hopes of building a movement in support of the Black farmers.

"There is no more significant group of people than those who till the soil," Lowery said. "You do not deserve to lose 13 million acres of land in a half century just because you are Black."

Akwasi Evans is publisher/editor of NOKOA-The Observer Newspaper in Austin, Texas.

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