

October 19, 2008

COUNTY LINES | WHITE PLAINS

## Shelters to Be Paid for Aid to the Battered and the Illegal

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WHITE PLAINS



LILLIAN, a soft-spoken 36-year-old immigrant from Honduras, had a conspicuous black eye when she showed up at a hospital for a routine sonogram of her fetus. An alert clerk urged her to call a hot line for battered women.

She did not, but when she showed up for another sonogram, her companion came along and warned her that she was chatting too cozily with the clerk, adding menacingly that she had “a long tongue.” Since he had been punching her for months and, she said, had once threatened to kill her, Lillian did not stop the clerk from calling the police. The man fled, but Lillian went on to stay for four months at shelters run by the county’s two organizations that house battered women.

The two organizations, My Sister’s Place and the Northern Westchester Shelter, received not a dime of government reimbursement for helping her. That is because Lillian is an illegal immigrant. The shelters have housed, fed and counseled such women without public financing even as the numbers of undocumented women seeking help in Westchester has soared, with the growth in the county’s proportion of immigrants. These days, one out of every four shelter dwellers is undocumented, by some government estimates.

The shelters cannot — and philosophically will not — bar their doors to undocumented immigrants and so must swallow the costs, roughly a total of \$250,000 for each organization over the past four years. To make up deficits, Northern Westchester, which has a \$1.7 million budget, said it let go two lawyers and cut health insurance payments for its staff.

Karen Cheeks-Lomax, executive director of My Sister’s Place here, said she believes that “no woman should be stuck in a lifetime of battering,” but even if she believed otherwise, state law requires shelters to take in women regardless of their immigration status, a not-laughable Catch-22.

“It’s a significant inconsistency in terms of what we’re mandated to do,” she said. “You’re asking us to serve women and telling us we can’t discriminate and on the other hand you’re unwilling to provide reimbursement.”

That situation should end soon. Last month, Gov. David A. Paterson signed a law that assures shelters reimbursement for serving undocumented immigrants who are victims of domestic violence. The shelters are waiting for their first checks.

While fierce opponents of illegal immigration oppose spending any government money on social services, the law’s author, Assemblywoman Amy Paulin of Scarsdale, estimated that sheltering undocumented women should cost the state and localities not much over \$1 million a year.

Though there are many economic and psychological reasons women linger with men who beat them, a shadowy immigration status makes it even harder to break away. Five women in the two shelters told me they had feared going to the police, because they worried that that could lead to deportation. Even if they sought to do so, the women said, their companions or husbands would have threatened to betray them to immigration officials.

THE potential for such threats comes on top of the predictable immigrant stresses of scratching out a living while not speaking the prevailing language. And often the reason for staying is heartbreakingly personal. Maria, 41, a Salvadoran mother of two, said she remained with an abusive spouse because “I didn’t have a father and I wanted my children to have one.”

R. S., 37, an Israeli Arab who arrived eight years ago on a tourist visa to live in an arranged marriage, said her husband kicked and punched her daily for transgressions like taking a hot shower and washing windows with a glass cleaner whose smell he did not like. He would not let her legalize her residency.

She felt utterly alone in a strange country, so she stayed with him. Her husband sometimes dared her to take their small daughter back to Israel and she did not, fearing he could accuse her of kidnapping and get sole custody. She and her daughter finally moved into My Sister’s Place in June.

“When you are an immigrant, you have nothing,” R. S. said. “The woman, if she is not financially independent and is not authorized to work, they stay with their husband.”

Natasha, 27, a medical student from Kenya who married an American son of missionaries, described how her husband yanked out her hair, choked her and threatened to kill her for things like boiling his eggs for more than three-and-a-half minutes. “What are you going to do? This is America. Nobody’s going to believe you,” she said her husband warned her.

Without a green card and hailing from a country where law enforcement is corrupt, she said, she was afraid to go to the police. She stayed on, feeling herself unprepared for American life. “I had never seen snow and didn’t have a coat,” she said.

In August 2007, her husband locked her in their apartment for three days, but with the aid of neighbors she slipped out and fled to a shelter run by Northern Westchester. CarlLa Horton, the executive director, said that Natasha was one of 66 women and 76 children housed last year for up to four months, many without reimbursement.

The shelter is reimbursed only \$97 a day for qualified women, even though its cost is \$125 a day. The difference is made up through donations.

Natasha, who now works as a live-in housekeeper, is pleased that the new legislation will make it less worrisome for shelters to take in illegal immigrants and women will more readily seek protection. “It means they have a way out,” she said. “They don’t have to stay and suffer.”