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Montgomery opens domestic violence center

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Rep. Chris Van Hollen congratulates Montgomery County Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, center, on Monday for her efforts in creating the Family Justice Center. (Courtesy photo)

Montgomery County has opened the region's first one-stop clearinghouse designed to help victims of domestic violence have better access to the legal and county services they need.

The Family Justice Center in downtown Rockville offers free legal help and advice, access to police, financial assistance, social service counseling, child care, immigration advice and other services to victims of domestic violence. The goal is to make it easier for victims of domestic violence to come forward and to prevent them from being re-victimized by a potentially overwhelming bureaucracy that may be insensitive to their needs, supporters said.

"I had to get a protective order; I left with just the clothes on my back, I didn't have clothes; I didn't have any money because my abuser had taken my money, so that was gone; I had to make sure my child was OK; I had to find a place to live, I had to get an attorney to start a divorce action," said Cheryl Kravitz, a domestic violence survivor and co-chairwoman of Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley's Family Violence Council. "There's probably 10 or 12 different things a person who leaves an abusive situation needs to take care of immediately."

Though it officially opened Monday, the county has been running the site for two weeks. About 80 people visited during that time, said Hannah Sassoon, the site's manager.

Before the center opened, a victim of domestic violence would need to go to as many as 42 places in Montgomery County for help, Sassoon said. "People have spent the entire day at court trying to get a protective order," she said. "It's daunting."

About 20 people a day file a protective order in the county, Sassoon estimated. In 2007, Montgomery County police documented 2,000 incidents of domestic violence and 170 families sought shelter from domestic violence, according to county data. County Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, D-at large, who has pushed for the family justice center for years, said the opening was happening at a crucial time as a weakening economy could lead to more domestic violence. "The stress around losing jobs, losing homes ... [makes] a situation more ripe for a violent dynamic to occur in a family," Trachtenberg said. The new program will cost the county about \$700,000 a year for the lease, Sassoon said, but won't have additional costs because it is consolidating services, not adding new ones.