

WE ARE A SAFE HOME

by a Project volunteer

Many people that I have spoken with have expressed a deep concern about the effects of family violence, but respond with looks ranging from uncertainty to panic when I suggest that they find out about becoming a volunteer Safe Home. The possibility of joining the neighborhood network seems much more likely, however, after hearing about my experiences.

My husband and I had discussed the problems of wife battering with our children (ages 8, 9, 11, and 14) and the six of us agreed that we wanted to find out more about becoming a Safe Home. We were told, first of all, that we would be part of a team approach. Our responsibility would be to offer food and shelter for three days. We would not be expected to do counseling (each woman is assigned a trained Counselor) or give legal advice or provide for long-term arrangements. We would provide just a supportive environment where a woman can relax for a few days and consider her options. We were also told that as a Safe Home, we would be provided with a Counselor for those three days. We, too, would have someone we could call for support or guidance.

Being familiar with the statistics regarding the frequency of this problem, we wondered if our phone would be jumping off the hook once we registered as a Safe Home. That wouldn't be a problem. Each family can indicate how often they want to be used by the Project. Even opening up your house once or twice a year adds to the pool of available homes in the neighborhood. And, if you would rather not be called on a weekend, or feel that you have only enough space for a woman without children or have other special considerations, they will be noted on your volunteer card and respected. When you are called, it will be by a Project staff member who will discuss the emergency situation with you and determine whether or not you are willing and able to offer your home at that time.

Reassured, my family became a volunteer Safe Home and we have now been called twice by the Project. Our first experience taught us that there is no such thing as a "typical" case, although this one did make some very unusual demands on us. The Project Coordinator told us that a woman with three children under the age of six needed emergency shelter. The woman, Carol, a college student in her late twenties, had been beaten throughout her marriage. Her husband had prevented her from leaving him by refusing to allow her ever to leave the apartment with all three of the children. He kept at least one child at home to make certain that his wife would return.

Carol, who has no family in the New York area, contacted the Project. Together, she and a Counselor arranged for Carol to leave the house with her two older children. Citing medical emergency, Carol returned to the apartment with police protection for her six-month-old infant. At the same time she grabbed a packed suitcase which had been carefully hidden in the apartment and fled.

The first stop was at a local hospital for medical treatment. Carol's nose had been broken during a recent beating and she would have to remain in

the hospital overnight. The overnight stay was lengthened to two days and two nights when the doctors realized that past beatings had complicated Carol's injuries. Our first experience as a Safe Home, therefore, turned our house into a mini-nursery. Instead of having a battered woman and her children as we had expected, we had three children, four years, two years, and six months, and no woman!

Before we had time to panic, the Safe Homes Project sprang into action. A volunteer Counselor, stationed at the hospital Carol was admitted to, started to talk with Carol about her post-hospital plans. We received regular reports both about Carol's condition and about the long-term arrangements so that we could reassure the older children and answer their questions. A teen-age babysitter, hired by the Project for the three-day emergency, provided me with a few hours every afternoon to sit back and catch up on the rest that had been lost during the no-longer-familiar 2 am feedings. When the babysitter wasn't around my own children took over the nurturing with an intensity that is aroused by an emergency situation. Well-loved but outgrown dolls were passed down by my older daughters to the two- and four-year old girls, and everyone wanted turns feeding and holding the infant. By the third day, when Carol returned to pick up the children, we all had very mixed feelings about having our first Safe Home experience come to an end.

Later we happened to learn that after a brief stay in a Manhattan shelter for battered women, Carol was able to contact out-of-state relatives and, with their help, set up a home for herself and her children.

Almost a year later we received another call from the Project. This time a woman with a four-year-old child stayed with us for two days. Her Safe Home was changed when we discovered that her husband's relatives lived nearby and she did not feel comfortable going outside. Although brief, our second experience made clear the usual function of a Safe Home: sitting and listening to a woman who might, as in this case, be telling her story to someone for the first time; giving support for her shaky belief that she has a right to a different kind of life.

The fact that both of our experiences have been positive has not been due simply to good fortune, but rather to good planning. No family is sent to a Safe Home until a Counselor has met with the woman and decided that she would be able to function successfully within a Safe Home. A woman who is an alcohol or drug abuser, therefore, would not be sent to a Safe Home. Nor would a severely disturbed woman. Occasionally a decision might be made not to send a woman into a volunteer Safe Home where there are young children if it is felt that the physical signs of the abuse would cause distress. In cases where a Safe Homes stay is not advisable, the Project has arranged for a back-up support system. (See Emergency Hotel Stay, page)

Being a Safe Home brings the obvious inconvenience and disruption of routine. Another aid to helping the program succeed is to hold "rap sessions" for families who volunteer their homes. Meeting together to share the rough spots and the high moments strengthens the Safe Homes network.