

# Victims plead for help as centres overworked IN CRISIS

COMMUNITY services are struggling to cope with the staggering rise in the number of women trapped in domestic violence requesting their help, with one agency seeing demand jump from 9 per cent to 28 per cent in the past three years.

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## Services struggling to cope

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COMMUNITY services are struggling to cope with a staggering rise in the cries for help from women caught in domestic violence. Victoria Shiel, director of the Gold Coast Community Legal Service, said in the past three years, the demand in the areas of domestic and family violence had jumped from 9 per cent to 28 per cent of their work.

The statistics were obtained in a census by the National Association of Community Legal Centres and she said they were part of an overall sharp increase in the number of people seeking free legal assistance on the Coast.

"Unfortunately, not all of them can receive the help they need and often have to return to violent homes," she said. The other alternative was homelessness or family law issues.

"We hate having to turn people away and we worry about the welfare of our clients," Ms Shiel said. "We are noticing the urgency of cases and we are getting more requests from people with critical needs for assistance."

Ms Shiel said domestic and family violence cases were not simple legal

matters and often involved a need for housing, counselling of children, breaking tenancy agreements and making arrangements for children.

"These are more time-sensitive than other legal matters and help is often required more urgently," she said.

Ms Shiel said she was deeply concerned that when anticipated funding cuts of 30 per cent came in to effect in June next, her service would have even less resources to help victims.

"We would have to consider reducing our opening hours and staff working hours," she said. "This would mean we may not be in a position to maintain the 11 locations we use across the Coast to deliver frontline services such as information, advice and casework. We would also have to turn more away."

Kate Armstrong, of My Friends' Place, which provides emergency accommodation for women and children

affected by domestic violence, said the statistics did not surprise her at all.

"We have four refuges on the Coast

and we receive calls daily from women seeking help," she said. "We are full pretty much all the time and the hard part is turning away women and children on a regular basis, not knowing where they are going to. It's horrible getting calls from women and messages on Facebook when we are full."

Ms Armstrong said the need was so great the charity was planning to open another two to four refuges in the next 12 months but even then would not have enough refuges to meet demand.

## Victims reach out to prevention centre for help

JOAN Salizzo, acting director of the Gold Coast Domestic Violence Prevention Centre, said the effects of latest domestic violence statistics from the National Association of Community Legal Centres were filtering down to her service. She said staff had also reported a considerable increase in cases in the past three years and this month alone the centre had had 36 walk-in cases.

"Our counselling team, which

comprises at least three people answering phones and two to three people doing face-to-face counselling, now has about 2500 contacts a month," she said. "These vary from women seeking basic information to those who urgently need help."

The new Domestic Violence Court at Southport has also seen a 59 per cent increase in cases since its introduction last year.

"Naturally, that filters down to

our service," Ms Salizzo said. "Last year, there were two highly-publicised homicides on the Coast and tragedies like that always alert a lot of people who might have been living with domestic violence for some time to get in touch with a service like ours. If someone requires immediate safety and is at imminent risk, she can see us the same day. If a case is a standard risk, we make an appointment for the woman to see us."