

FIRST GLANCE

New victims' advocate starts work for Cole County

By KRIS HILGEDICK
News Tribune

Maureen Qualheim — formerly a victims' advocate in West Palm Beach, Florida — has been hired to perform the same duties here in Cole County.



Qualheim started the job Monday and will fight for victims of domestic violence, said Prosecutor Bill Tackett on Saturday.

Until August 2005, she did the same sort of work in Florida.

As an advocate, Qualheim will: provide crisis counseling to clients, advise them about referral services, organize relocation options, handle questions about victims' compensation and help them secure protective orders.

She'll also help victims of domestic violence make safer plans for the future.

Tackett said Qualheim brings a terrific resume and will perform the same sort of duties she did in Palm Beach, where she dealt with felony cases. Part of her job there included assembling police reports, statements, physical evidence, criminal history and client information so prosecutors could file formal charges.

"I'm thrilled to have the position," she said. "It's challenging. It goes to the heart of

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what's important to me, helping people."

Qualheim said a big part of the job is to make people more aware of domestic violence and its negative impact on families. "Community awareness is a crucial part of prevention," she said.

After only three days on the job, she's still working to learn what resources are available in Cole County.

Her hope is to become a liaison to agencies such as the Cole County Sheriff's Department and Jefferson City Police Department.

Qualheim said typically incidents of domestic violence are under-reported, because victims fear retaliation from the abuser or feel they can't leave for financial reasons. Some victims stay with abusive spouses because they have children together.

Part of her task is to encourage victims to take action and help them find the resources they need to make that possible.

"There's no excuse or justification for abuse at any time," she said. "I'm very much looking forward to working with them and making a difference in people's lives."

In her job, she'll be working closely with RACS, the Rape and

Abuse Crisis Service.

Tackett, who has been on the service's board for 16 years, said RACS leaders helped him make the decision to hire Qualheim. He said the Jefferson City shelter is arguably the best in Missouri because of its state-of-the-art facility and experienced staff.

"She'll be there for the victim, all the way through (the process)," he said.

Qualheim's resume includes a stint at the Office of the State Attorney General in West Palm Beach, Florida, from 1999 to 2005. The Boone County Sheriff's Department also employed her between 1985 and 1991.

She holds a bachelor's degree in government and history from Columbia College.

Tackett said his office doesn't always wait for a victim's assent when waiting to press charges.

"We sometimes file charges based on evidence at the scene, the victim's condition or the defendant's comments," he explained.

Victims shouldn't feel ashamed, he said.

"Domestic violence permeates all segments of society. It's doesn't matter how rich you are, what your social standing is or what your family's name is," he said.

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