

VALLEY

Safe Havens to close in mid-April

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The Nurturing Center's Safe Havens supervised visitation and exchange center will be temporarily suspended on April 15 because it's once again out of money.

After the program faced a financial crisis last fall when a federal grant expired, the community rallied to raise enough money to keep it afloat for a few more months. In the meantime program directors vowed to find more grant money.

Safe Havens has provided monitored visits between parents and their children for court-ordered cases since 2005.

Court-ordered use of the visitation and exchange center often focuses on such problems as a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental-health problems or abduction concerns. Some-

times, no contact between parents is desired by one or both parents.

If a lengthy separation of children and parents has occurred, meeting within the Save Havens environment can help re-establish the relationship.

"We managed to raise enough money locally to keep the program fully operational for an additional eight months after funding ended," Nurturing Center Director Susan Christofferson said. "We are still awaiting news from numerous foundations regarding requested grant funds for the program."

Christofferson said she targeted smaller foundations with "fewer hoops" to jump through in her quest for Safe Havens funding and hasn't heard back on about \$84,000 in potential grants. Some federal money will be available by October, but in a worst-case scenario the program could be shut down until October 2009 when another

federal grant becomes available.

"We're working tirelessly to research other foundations and I'll continue to work on it," she said.

Before Safe Havens, Christofferson did all of the visitations herself, an exhausting task that was consuming evenings and weekends. Visits previously were conducted at The Nurturing Center.

She said she will resume her old schedule of conducting visitations.

Christofferson is negotiating with other nonprofit groups to help out, but they need to be compensated.

"I don't know how the courts will handle" the loss of Safe Havens, she said. "The problem is, families can't afford to pay what [the visitations] actually cost."

Flathead District Judge Kitty Curtis said the loss of Safe Havens leaves few options for the court to bring family members together for visitation. Before Safe Havens began, the court sometimes used

other family members for supervision, although that option can be problematic.

"A lot of times there's such polarization in the family," Curtis said, adding that if there are allegations of sexual abuse or molestation, the judge has to be convinced the designated family member has the skills and ability to provide a safe environment.

"One of the good things about Safe Havens is that we knew they were available so there were no gaps in time, and that's particularly important if it's a young child," Curtis said.

Safe Havens initially relied on a \$289,798 grant from the Office on Violence Against Women in the U.S. Department of Justice to establish the visitation center in a small Kalispell home. But the federal grant expired Aug. 31, 2007, and the Nurturing Center missed the deadline to renew it. The center reapplied in February.