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NEW DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES FOR RURAL FRESNO COUNTY RESIDENTS

The Marjaree Mason Center and the Fresno County Superior Court are now offering free domestic violence assistance by videoconferencing from the B.F. Sisk courthouse to two secure locations in Firebaugh and Reedley. Fresno County residents may call the Marjaree Mason Center's 24-hour hotline at 559-233-HELP (4357) to make appointments for confidential and private videoconferences with trained domestic violence advocates. Videoconferences are available in Spanish and other languages on weekdays during traditional business hours. For safety reasons, the locations of the videoconference offices in Firebaugh and Reedley are only provided to persons who make appointments through the Marjaree Mason Center's hotline. Staff at these offices start the videoconference sessions and provide technical assistance to make the process easy and convenient for residents regardless of their technology expertise and comfort level.

Advocates provide information on legal options, help rural residents with safety planning, and connect them to legal and community services. The videoconference process enables the advocates in Fresno to assist rural residents in completing court forms such as protective order or child custody petitions. Through the commercial videoconference system, advocates and residents are able to view and work on these documents simultaneously. Using signature pads, residents authorize completed forms electronically. The advocates then print the signed documents at the courthouse and file them with the Fresno Superior Court, saving rural residents travel time and expense.

Marjaree Mason Center Director of Legal Services Stacy Gomez explained that this is the second phase of a collaborative project that began in December 2015 with the opening of a Marjaree Mason Center advocates' office at the Sisk courthouse to provide onsite services. "We know that persons living in rural areas don't have the same access to services as those living in the city of Fresno. They often face language and transportation barriers with obtaining restraining orders and other forms of supportive services. Through this collaborative project, we hope to make services more accessible to rural residents throughout Fresno County," Gomez noted.

Family Law Supervising Judge D. Tyler Tharpe who is leading the project noted that the videoconference advocate services are part of the court's ongoing mission to expand access to services for all Fresno County residents. "The Fresno Superior Court is proud to be part of this domestic violence assistance project that is the first of its kind involving a California court. It's on the leading edge of a growing movement to use technology to expand access to court and community services for residents regardless of where they live," he said.

Comprehensive Youth Services (CYS) is also a partner in this project that is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women. To improve family outcomes, noncustodial parents dealing with domestic violence issues are able to visit with their children at no cost in CYS's safe and monitored visitation center in Fresno.

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