

Public Safety Program Excellence Award in Memory of William H. Hansell, Sr., and Alice Hansell

POPULATIONS OF GREATER THAN 50,000



MICHAEL T. HUTCHINSON

ICMA's Public Safety Program Excellence Award, established in memory of Philadelphia firefighter William H. Hansell, Sr., and his wife Alice, is awarded to a local government and its chief administrator for the most creative public safety program. This year, ICMA presents the Public Safety Program Excellence Award in the greater-than-50,000 population category to Mesa, Arizona, and City Manager Michael T. Hutchinson for Mesa's Center Against Family Violence.

Over the last 25 years, the problems of child, spouse, and elder abuse have emerged as major social issues, adversely impacting millions of Americans. According to national statistics, violence occurs in 25–60 percent of all families. Often those suffering abuse are “revictimized” by an investigative process that has little regard for the emotional toll such abuse takes. Victims are typically interviewed by several different agencies, at several

different times and many have to submit to more than one medical exam because the first is inadequate. Some victims wait for hours for interviews and exams in unfriendly, “suspect-oriented” police interrogation rooms. In many communities, weeks go by before the county attorney’s office is able to review the case, which seems like years to those who are directly affected.

In an effort to address these problems, the city of Mesa, Arizona, established the Center Against Family Violence in the fall of 1994. The city leased a 14,000-square-foot office building in the downtown area, just four blocks from the main police station. The center brought together, under one roof, city, county, state, and non-profit agencies to provide medical examination, prosecutors, and social services. The Center’s collaborative venture allows it to provide coordinated investigative methods and intervention treatment to victims of sexual abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, and other forms of family violence.

This collaborative, insightful, “victim-friendly” approach aims to make the process of reporting abuse as comfortable as possible. The Center also addresses the low conviction rates associated with domestic crimes, thwarting acceptance of family violence as a community norm.

Since the Center opened, the turndown rate of requests for prosecution has dropped from nearly 57 percent to 18 percent. The Center also has contributed to a shorter investigative process—from an average of 12 hours over many days and weeks to just 4 or 5 hours. Statistics indicate that the Mesa Police Department is experiencing a reduction in domestic violence calls even as the population is growing, and city officials give much of the credit to the work of the Center Against Family Violence.

While these results are impressive, the Center has continued to look for opportunities to improve service delivery. It has added new services for victims, offering advocacy with mental health professionals, legal advocates, crisis and short-term counseling, victim notification services, and support groups. The Center also has expanded to provide services to several neighboring communities. As a result, the number of case-loads handled by the Center has increased from 1,460 in 1997 to over 2,800 per year today.

The Center has become known for its cooperative funding of services, grant collaborations, and the reduction of duplicative efforts in programs. Saving public funds through efficiencies brought about by coordinating staff time, travel, equipment, and office space is one of the things good government is all about. Protecting and improving the quality of life for its citizens—including victims of family violence—is another. The city of Mesa’s Center Against Family Violence simultaneously accomplishes these critical objectives. ♣

Inside the city of Mesa’s Center Against Family Violence.

