

Victims' progress truer measure

ANDERSON Charles

SUCCESS in dealing with domestic violence needs to be measured in positive victim outcomes rather than perpetrator recidivism, says a visiting American judge.

Judge Eugene Hyman is a judge of the Superior Court of California, where for 18 years, he has presided over cases in the criminal, civil, probate, family and delinquency divisions of the court. In 1999, he presided over the first juvenile domestic violence court in the United States.

Judge Hyman was in Nelson on Tuesday to visit several groups, including Maori representatives and Barnados.

Recent figures show that the Tasman police district, which includes Nelson, Marlborough and the West Coast, has one of the lowest rates of family violence, with one incident per 75 people last year.

The eastern district, which includes Napier, Hastings and Gisborne, recorded the most, with 5549 incidents of family violence, or one incident per 36 people.

More than half of the 77,611 family violence incidents last year occurred between couples, with 36,808 incidents.

Judge Hyman said policy makers always wanted to look at rates of recidivism in domestic violence perpetrators as a measure of success, but too often ignored the progress of victims.

"We don't know if we can change the behaviour of batterers, but you want the victim to be able to change their life if they want to."

Judge Hyman set up a victims' centre in his court as a way to concentrate on positive outcomes for victims.

"People want to look at recidivism. What they are not looking at is how many women have moved onto healthy relationships and how many juvenile victims have not gone into foster care."

The court was awarded a United Nations public service award for its work in 2008, the first project in the United States to receive it.

Judge Hyman said research suggested that no-one had really worked out how to rehabilitate offenders.

"Like stabbers, how do you rehabilitate them? Give me a substance abuser any day, those ones are easy."

He said he would advocate for a similar specialist court in New Zealand, but anywhere there were issues of educating judges on the workings of each court.

"(Judges) need to have an understanding of multiple systems that involve families and need to be working cohesively rather than independent decision makers, because that is more harmful than helpful."