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Victims call fake address key to safety

By Jennifer Brown
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A Westminster woman who believes her abusive, soon-to-be-ex-husband crept into her last house to crank up the heat and turn on all the faucets is desperately hoping he doesn't find out where she moved.

Marie, who does not want her full name published because she fears for her safety, is among those who would sign up for a fake address under a proposed program state lawmakers debated Tuesday.

"He turned from Dr. Jekyll (to) Mr. Hyde after we got married and stayed there," she said in an interview. "He is harassing me and he won't leave me alone."

Victims of rape, domestic violence or stalking could use a fake address, with the actual address known only to the secretary of state's office, under the proposal.

The legislation, House Bill 1350, is intended to protect people from abusers who could track them down online within minutes through public records.

The secretary of state would receive and forward any mail sent to the fake address. Victims who sign up for the confidentiality program could use the fake address on school records, voter registration cards and income-tax forms.

Another Colorado woman, Janet, said she has not registered to vote in 15 years because a teenager she testified against in an attempted murder case vowed to kill her someday. She canceled her voter registration when she got a jury-duty request in the mail.

"I knew then I was on some public record somewhere," she said. "I was petrified and having nightmares."

The legislation has widespread, bipartisan support, with 48 co-sponsors in the House. The House State Affairs Committee heard testimony on the bill Tuesday but delayed the vote to wait for more detail on the program's funding.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, said perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual assault likely would have to pay fees of about \$20 to fund the address confidentiality program. Nearly 15,000 domestic violence cases were filed in Colorado courts in 2005.

"There are not a lot of bills that you could describe as a matter of life and death, but this is one of them," Romanoff said.

The state would start collecting the fines in July and victims would sign up for the program in July 2008, said Amber Tafoya, public policy director for the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence. She expects a few hundred people would sign up for fake addresses.

"We are talking about those people who have that deep fear for their safety," Tafoya said.

Nearly 5,000 women and their children lived in Colorado domestic violence shelters in 2005, but more than 5,500 were turned away because there was no room.

"Imagine if you couldn't find safety in a shelter - you're going to be moving from address to address to address," said Denise Washington, executive director of the domestic violence coalition.

Rep. Kent Lambert, R-Colorado Springs, questioned whether the address-confidentiality program might give victims a "false sense of security" because private detectives likely could still find them.

But Rep. Steve King, a Republican from Grand Junction who is a former police officer, said that concern was unwarranted.

"The last thing that they have is a false sense of security," said King, who is sponsoring the bill with Romanoff. "Building back to a sense of security at all is an admiral goal."

The address-confidentiality program would give victims "the opportunity to do something more than they did before, which was to run," King said.

The Colorado proposal would mimic programs in 21 other states.

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