

SOS helps mother in distress

Fri. 8-17-90 Herald News

By Diane Haines

Staff Writer

The troubles of a 26-year-old Paterson mother seemed insurmountable. She was homeless and in the midst of custody fight for her two daughters, who she suspects were sexually assaulted by their father.

That's when an organization called Save Our Sisters stepped in. Representatives of that group said the woman — like the many they help — has been totally victimized by the system.

But with the backing of the group, the woman said she is now prepared to try to establish a home and battle for custody of her daughters, ages seven and five. She voluntarily placed the children in foster care several months ago when she became homeless.

The custody case is scheduled to be back in Passaic County Superior Court in Paterson on Aug. 29.

At the last hearing on the custody case on July 23, state Superior Court Judge Herbert S. Alterman ordered a check on the father's criminal record and his past failure to pay child support for the girls. He also asked for psychological evaluations of both parents and a status report on the mother's residence.

The father was sentenced on Dec. 2, 1987 to three years in prison after pleading guilty to a weapons offense. He is now employed as an airline mechanic in Florida. He could not be reached for comment.

Sandra Ramos, who heads Save Our Sisters, said at the last court hearing the father anticipated he would be able to take the girls to Florida with him. She said the state Division of Youth and Family Services backs his efforts to gain custody of the sisters and charges that DYFS has ignored evidence that the father drinks and may have sexually abused

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— Sandra Ramos,
Save Our Sisters

the children.

Winnie Stites, a spokeswoman for DYFS in Trenton, said it is against agency policy to comment on any case.

"This woman has been totally victimized by the system," Ramos said.

Meanwhile, court records show that disputes between the parents started in 1987. The first action was a paternity suit filed by the mother.

After her boyfriend was found to be the father of the girls, a series of court orders set up support payments. He is now more than \$6,000 behind in payments, the records show.

The mother's web of legal and emotional problems are among the wrongs Ramos and her volunteers said they set out to right four years ago when they started Save Our Sisters. The organization is a spinoff of the Shelter Our Sisters program in Hackensack, which she helped to create.

Ramos, a teacher at William Paterson College in Wayne, said she left the Shelter Our Sisters organization because it lost its "heart" and became a tangle of bureaucracy. The two groups are now involved in the civil court action in Bergen County over the use of the SOS name.

Even after leaving the Hackensack-based group, Ramos said she still got calls for help from battered and abused women.

That's when she said she decided to start the new organization which now has shelters and safe houses in Passaic and Bergen counties.