Lori Hensley, left, talks to one of the guests at last Friday's reception for Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Hensley recently came on board as the director of Liberal Area Rape Crisis/Domestic Violence Services following the retirement of former director Hope Alvarez, who was also honored at the reception at Ruffino's. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

The Liberal Area Rape Crisis/Domestic Violence Services offices hosted a reception last Friday at Ruffino's as part of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Part of the event was also to say goodbye to LARC/DVS's former director, Hope Alvarez, and to welcome the new agency head, Lori Hensley.

Originally from Ford County, Hensley has moved between there and Liberal for about the last 16 years, coming back to Liberal in November 2012.

Hensley had previously worked for the City of Liberal and had done executive work for about 15 to 18 years, but this is her first time working with an agency such as LARC/DVS.

She did say, though, that the work she will be doing is somewhat similar to her previous jobs.

"I've always done a lot of grant writing, grant administration, and this job entails a lot of that and overseeing the staff," she said. "As far as what my job entails, I don't see a lot of difference from what other executive work I've done. I find that it tugs on my heart a lot better."

Hensley said agency officials have many goals, but one of her primary ones is to see more people in the center.

"We know there are more victim survivors out there that we don't see," she said. "It's to get more people into the agency and those that need assistance for shelter and whatever that might be will be able to come to us and know that we are here."

Public awareness is likewise one of Hensley's main goal as she comes on board as director.

"They've done a great job over the last 32 years of making the public know who they are," she said. "I don't think in our case that you can have too much public awareness."

Hensley said part of the problem of getting more people through the doors of LARC/DVS is that many domestic violence cases go unreported.

"Due to fear, anxiety, embarrassment, people don't report," she said. "It's very confidential. Everything we do is confidential. We don't share their information with anyone else. Confidential and privacy is huge to us."

As for Alvarez, she got her start with the agency serving two months as a board member, and before her retirement as director, she had served five and a half years as the head of LARC/DVS.

Prior to coming on board with that agency, Alvarez had retired after 20 years with the Seward County Health Department.

"We had moved away from Liberal," she said. "We were away for four years, came back, and I became a board member volunteering. I saw where they were needing an executive director. The previous director, due to health reasons, had retired. I just kind of threw my hat in the ring, and fortunately, they decided to hire me."

Alvarez said her transition from the health department was a fairly smooth one.

"We're talking about women and children, which is public health also, maybe a little bit different than domestic violence," she said.

Alvarez did say, however, that there are some difference between a health department and a domestic violence agency.

"It took a little bit getting used to because in public health, all you see is the shots and people coming in for welfare," she said. "When I came into this field, I saw a lot of trauma and a lot of domestic violence that women went through. It took a little bit, a few months to kind of adjust my mentality to think that we're talking about a different kind of service here."

Alvarez agreed with Hensley that much in the way of public education needs to be done to help the community realize what domestic violence really is.

"It is in our community," she said. "It's a silent disease until people start coming forward, especially the women in gaining the trust that the system will help them out. We need to go into the community and educate people more as to what domestic violence is. It's not just a fight between a man and a woman. There's a lot of factors to it."

In her retirement, Alvarez plans to enjoy her grandchildren and travel.

"I've decided that it's my time," she said. "With Lori coming on board, I'm very confident that she will bring the agency to a different level. I feel I can retire and not worry about the center anymore. I will still continue to volunteer."

Alvarez said she picked Domestic Violence Awareness Month to retire because it provided great timing to make the transition.

"I think this was kind of the passing of the torch to (Hensley), and this was the perfect opportunity to do it this month," she said.