



**LETTER TO THE EDITOR: OCTOBER IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
AWARENESS MONTH**

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**Commissioner, Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse
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Stories of domestic violence are commonplace in Oklahoma. Far too often, we read about men who shoot their wives or girlfriends and then turn the gun on themselves. We hear about children who witness abuse in the home and, in some cases, are also abused at home.

Try to imagine your home and family, the very source of our sense of security, belonging and love, as the root of terror and fear for your life; this is an unfortunate reality for too many Oklahomans.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, an observance designed to heighten awareness about the devastating impact domestic violence has on our society.

Oklahoma, unfortunately, ranks near the top in this area. As a state, we rank third in the nation for the number of African-American women killed with handguns by their partners; Oklahoma ranks fourth for the number of white women shot by their partners.

In Oklahoma, nearly one in five women over age 18 who is married or in a similar relationship reported being emotionally or physically abused by a male partner.

Additionally, more than one quarter of all Oklahoma 9th-12th grade students report being intentionally harmed by their boyfriend or girlfriend, which is significantly higher than the national average.

Adult victims of domestic violence may experience fear, anxiety, depression and trauma as a result of the abuse. Children in homes where there is violence also may have the same experience, but are without the ability and understanding an adult may have to deal with these experiences. Some of these children also are victims of physical and emotional abuse. In domestic violence homicides where children are present, nearly 50 percent actually witnessed the homicide. Research shows that children who have been exposed to violence are at high risk for developing further serious mental health or substance abuse problems later in life. As a result, the impact of domestic violence can be felt for many generations.

As citizens, we can and should become involved in stopping the cycle of violence in Oklahoma. All it takes is one person to help a victim. It is important to realize that domestic violence cuts across all socioeconomic levels, and it affects all of our communities.

If you suspect a friend or loved one is involved in an abusive relationship, here are some basic steps to assist them:

- ✓ Approach your friend in an understanding, non-blaming way. Acknowledge that it's frightening and difficult to talk about domestic violence. Tell your friend they don't deserve to be threatened, hit or beaten. Nothing a person can do or say makes the abuser's violence OK. However, it is important to express your concern in a manner that doesn't put the victim at greater risk for harm.

✓ Support this person as a friend. Be a good listener. Encourage your friend to express their hurt and anger. Allow them to make their own decision, even if it means not being ready to leave the abusive relationship.

✓ Ask if your friend has suffered physical harm. Go with them to the hospital to check for injuries. Help report the assault to police, if the victim chooses to do so.

✓ Inform your friend about legal protection available under abuse prevention laws. Go with her or him to the county courthouse to get a protective order to prevent further harassment by the abuser. If you can't go, find someone who can.

✓ Plan safe strategies for leaving an abusive relationship. Never encourage someone to follow a safety plan that the person believes will put her/him at further risk.

The issue of domestic violence is a complicated one. But it's also deadly. The longer it goes on, the worse it becomes. Fortunately, Oklahoma has a number of shelters and domestic violence services for victims and their children, as well as batterers' intervention programs for perpetrators willing to change their behavior.

Please join me in making a commitment to end domestic violence in Oklahoma.

To obtain more information, including referral to shelters and counseling services, call "Safeline" at 1-800-522-7233.

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