



“Point of View” – October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month

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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, behavior they are bound to repeat as they grow older, believing it is “normal.”

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.

A study conducted in 1999 by the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services found that nearly one in five Oklahoma women over the age of 18 who are married or in similar relationships reported being emotionally or physically abused by a male partner. Of the nearly 136,000 adult women who reported being involved

in abusive domestic relationships, more than 105,000 reported emotional abuse, 24,000 suffered both emotional and physical abuse, and more than 6,750 were physically abused.

In addition to the health and mental health issues associated with domestic violence, the impact on children is distressing, as well. Children who witness or experience violence in the home are more likely to grow up abusing drugs and alcohol, and to perpetuate the cycle of violence. They also are more prone to mental health problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, anxiety and poor self-esteem.

And how could they not suffer? In domestic violence homicides where children are present, nearly 50 percent actually witnessed the homicide. Thirty percent of perpetrators passed threatening messages through the child.

As citizens, we can and should become involved in recognizing and preventing domestic violence. All it takes is one person to help a victim. It's also important to realize that domestic violence cuts across all socioeconomic levels, from people in poverty to wealthy couples.

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.

- ✓ 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 safe houses and shelters for victims, and also offers batterers' intervention programs for perpetrators willing to change their behavior.

To obtain information about any of these programs, including referral to shelters and counseling services, call "Safeline" at 1-800-522-7233.

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