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A Lurking Problem County Should Address Stalking

EDITORIALS

Ithaca's beautiful gorges are one of the unique aspects of this small city. The steep walls of the many deep, shale gorges are beautiful and attractive to both tourists and long-term residents.

Those gorges also present a difficult challenge to local law enforcement when someone becomes injured. Consequently, the Ithaca Police Department specifically trains groups of officers for a task that is unheard of in most departments its size: It has a specialized gorge rescue team that can rappel down gorges to save injured hikers and other individuals. The Ithaca Fire Department receives similar training.

The gorge rescue team is an emergency-service adaptation to Ithaca's geography.

For similar reasons, local police – both municipal and campus – could join nonprofit and government agencies to increase coordination and training that would encourage a more comprehensive approach to the problem of stalking. Such an effort would not only provide police with more resources for reacting to a stalking incident, but would result in wider, proactive efforts to educate the public.

A recent Cornell University study found that one in five college and high school students have been stalked. It makes sense for police to adapt their training to both prevent and solve stalking in an area where college students represent a significant share of the population.

Stalking is a widespread problem

Stalking is defined as “intrusive contact,” which means that someone intentionally tries to contact a person who has previously asked that no further contact occur. In some cases, stalking is limited to a person watching or following another. But it can be much more serious: Fully 10 percent of stalking victims reported that the stalker tried to initiate or force sexual contact – and in 15 percent of cases, the stalker threatened or attempted to hurt the victims, according to the Department of Justice. Perhaps the most serious incident in memory came during a double homicide that occurred on the Cornell University campus nearly 25 years ago: a stalker traveled from New York City to follow a woman, and he subsequently killed the stalking victim and her roommate.

In Ithaca today, the Advocacy Center, an Ithaca-based nonprofit agency, specifically works with domestic violence and sexual abuse survivors. “A significant percentage of our clients experience stalking,” said Heather Campbell, education director for the Advocacy Center. Campbell and other experts on stalking note that most victims know the stalker. One study, by the National Center on Victims of Violent crime, noted that 77 percent of such victims know who their stalker is.

Combining local expertise is best approach

Since stalking incidents often cross campus borders, jurisdictions and often impact people from secondary school through college age, it makes sense that the effort to prevent and investigate such incidents would best be met by the creation of a formal interagency task force. The raw material for such a task force already exists here: There are trained professionals at the Advocacy Center, high school guidance offices, and agencies such as the Ithaca Police, New York State Police, Tompkins County Sheriff’s Office along with security and police agencies at Ithaca College, Cornell University and Tompkins Cortland Community College.

If professionals in those organizations joined forces to create a county-wide agency to deal with stalking, it would greatly enhance local efforts to address the problem. Such an agency could quickly and effectively notify the public about a particular stalker, investigate incidents when they occur and educate the public about what to do and where to turn when such incidents crop up.

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