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Campus Stalking Grounds

By Danny Lauridsen

When her sister died as a victim of a stalker four years ago, Cheryl Darisse decided to take action.

In 2000, Darisse founded Feel Safe Again, Inc., a Boston-based organization that serves to “provide additional resources” to victims of stalking, she said.

But Darisse and other stalking watch groups argue that since then, very little has been done to assess how great of a threat stalking continues to pose to society, especially on college campuses.

“Stalking on campus I think happens more than people realize,” Darisse said. “I’ve talked to a lot of people and they may think it’s less than what it is. They don’t come forward and actually report it.”

According to the Stalking Resource Center of the National Center for Victims of Crime, a 2000 study by the National Institute of Justice and the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed that 13 percent of college women were stalked at some point during the school year.

The study also showed that about 80 percent of victims had seen their stalkers before, while in about 15 percent of cases, their stalkers threatened or attempted to hurt them.

In about 10 percent of cases, the study showed, the stalker forced or attempted sexual contact.

In all, about four-fifths of all cases were not reported to police or campus law enforcement.

But the numbers have changed since 2000 and some experts are not satisfied with them.

“There aren’t great statistics on stalking,” said Susan Howley, Director of Public Policy and Victim Services for the NCVV.

One study in Massachusetts found that the number of arraignments for stalking cases rose 10 percent from 1999 to 2003.

Howley is working with the NCVV and prosecutors all over the country to create a universal definition of stalking that would be recognized nationally. Currently, every state has its own

definition, some of which contain more extensive protection than others.

“We are in the process of developing a new model law,” Howley said. “One of the troubling aspects of the Massachusetts law is that it does require that a threat be made. People might not realize that.”

Howley and Darisse both spoke about the unpredictability of stalking methods.

“With the lack of good statistics out there it’s hard to talk specifically in trends,” Howley said. She added that many stalkers use the Global Positioning System devices often found on dog collars to track their victims. She said that the use of newly developed technology to track victims is not covered sufficiently under Massachusetts law.

Darisse said she heard of one case in which a judge ordered a stalker who had used a GPS device to stay under house arrest while he was being tracked with a similar device. She found the story somewhat comforting.

One problem Darisse has found with the law is that it requires victims to prove that they felt their lives were threatened.

“How do you prove that?” Darisse asked. “We’re trying to fix that loophole in the law.”

Howley said compared to other states, Massachusetts law is “pretty good,” but she “would encourage Massachusetts legislatures to reexamine their law.”

Until then, both Darisse and Howley say they will work to offer a safe haven to victims of this often unpredictable offense.

“Stalking is a terrifying crime and it’s often a dealy crime,” Howley said.

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