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Domestic Violence: Women's Risks Increase after Breakup

By Kirsten J. Barnes, Montgomery Advertiser, kbarnes1@gannett.com

Women in abusive relationships are being warned by police and shelter counselors that they are at greater risk of being attacked right after they leave their partners.

The extraordinary alert comes after two Montgomery women recently reported being attacked by men whom they had just broken up with.

"Domestic violence is about power and control," said Melanie Beasley of the Family Sunshine Center, which operates a shelter for domestic violence victims. "The perpetrator knows that they are losing that power and control. They believe that by escalating the violence they can regain that power and control."

One woman was kidnapped outside her workplace by her estranged husband, who then beat her with a stick. The other woman was attacked by her ex-boyfriend at a restaurant where he worked. Both had called authorities just days before the crimes occurred.

An abusive relationship is taking a turn for the worst when a victim seeks counseling or when the partner attacks in public, according to police.

The cry for help is the victim's indication that the violence is escalating, said Lt. Steve Searcy, who oversees the Montgomery Police Department's Domestic Violence Bureau,

"That tells us that things have become more serious," Searcy said.

The abuser's signal is to attack in public, Searcy said, such as the kidnapping outside the workplace and the assault at the restaurant.

"It means they don't care anymore," said Searcy. "We look at that case and tell the victim 'you are in extreme danger.' Until we get that person picked up we advise them to go to a shelter."

Searcy, however, stressed that the Domestic Violence Bureau never orders a victim to leave her home.

“We don’t tell them what to do, we give them options,” he said.

Counselors at the Family Sunshine Center help every woman figure out how to protect herself and her children, regardless of whether she is ready to leave the relationship. Last year, the counselors prepared 500 of what they call “safety plans,” said program director Marjorie Baker.

Baker said a safety plan for a woman who is leaving or has left her abusive partner would include different routes she could take to and from work, ways to protect herself in public and emergency contact numbers.

The plan isn’t a guarantee of safety, but it is a step toward empowering the victim, she said.

“A persistent person will still likely find the person, but instead of the panic and freezing mode, the individual will have options of how to respond and get to safety,” Baker said. “Safety is our No. 1 priority.”

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