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Domestic Violence: Admit it George, We've Got a Problem

by Flavia Colgan

George W. Bush must think domestic violence in the United States is on its way out.

Why else would he slash the Violence Against Women Program in his FY 2004 budget, which cut funding for desperately needed emergency shelters, crisis hotlines and other services to protect women from violence?

Domestic violence isn't a problem anymore. It couldn't be.

If it were really a problem, the Bush Administration wouldn't propose to cut \$3 million from the 2005 budget for grants to states to improve stalker databases, encourage arrests, reduce violent crimes against women on campuses, and enhance protections for older and disabled women from domestic violence and sexual assault.

There's no better time to talk about this than now.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a national program which arose from the first Day of Unity observed in October, 1981 by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Its purpose is to connect battered women's advocates who work across the country to end violence against women and their children. The program has been growing and expanding for more than twenty years.

We need these programs. Across the nation 1,247 women and 440 men were killed by an intimate partner in the year 2000 alone.

The figures may have declined, but they don't sound anywhere near good enough to me, and this doesn't include all the domestic partners who are victims of mental abuse or non-fatal cases.

The only acceptable figures are zeros. And we're nowhere near that.

We're spending billions on Iraq, supposedly to keep us safe and secure. What about safety for our women here at home?

It seems to me the supposedly pro-life, pro-family Bush administration needs to start putting its money where its mouth is. Maybe instead of another huge tax cut for the CEO of Haliburton, we can protect our women at risk.

The fact of the matter is, when it comes to domestic violence, President Bush is either living in denial, or simply doesn't care. Despite his budget cuts, which seem to indicate the contrary, the number of total known domestic violence cases across America is getting worse.

In New York City alone, in 2003, 11,770 people called into the city domestic violence hotline to seek a refuge to escape abusive homes. But shelters in New York only have space to supply a total of 1,940 beds over the course of a year.

The Philadelphia Police get roughly 90,000 domestic violence reports each year. Yet, the city has only one shelter for battered women. It can only accommodate 21 women and their children at a time.

And if you think that domestic violence is just an urban problem, think again.

In 2002, in Wichita, Kansas, nearly 2,030 victims of domestic violence sought services from shelter programs, while more than 660 were provided with emergency shelter. Also in 2002, the Wichita Police Department responded to 7,815 domestic violence calls and made 3,114 arrests for domestic battery.

Meanwhile, in Alabama, in 2001, 40 domestic violence homicides were reported, 3,762 domestic violence aggravated assaults, and an astounding 24,635 domestic violence simple assaults.

The problem cuts across age groups as well. One in five teenage girls are physically or sexually assaulted by a dating partner. That rises to one in three when verbal and emotional abuse is included.

President Bush isn't just proposing to underfund services that care for women and strengthen law enforcement; his unwillingness to acknowledge that there is a problem in the first place is keeping money from communities that desperately need it.

Effective outreach can stop domestic violence before it begins, but, once again, the Bush administration is ignoring the problem.

Programs like the New York City pilot called Speak Your Peace target middle school kids. It teaches students – some as young as 10 – the self-respect and relationship skills that will help them recognize various kinds of abuse and stand up to bullies, whether in the schoolyard or, in the future, on a date. As the older sister of two teenage girls, I have come to appreciate the enduring effect even a little bit of knowledge can have on the life of an adolescent.

The Center Against Domestic Violence, which runs this pilot program, is also serving as a national model by reaching tens of thousands of teens in New York City high schools through the Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP). The Center helped to create the curriculum for this successful program that combines education, counseling and other activities. It manages RAPP in 13 public high schools throughout the city. Already these programs are showing promising results in getting at the root causes of domestic violence and nipping it in the bud.

This is groundbreaking work which should be extended to other American communities, rural and urban alike. No public servant at any level of local, state or national government should accept the fact that a community doesn't have the money to provide women and children in harm's way with shelter, safety and counseling, especially the President of the United States.

Experts say the greatest hurdle in solving individual domestic violence cases is getting women to admit to themselves that they are in an abusive relationship. The greatest obstacle in a national approach is finding a President who will admit we have a domestic violence problem.

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