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Domestic Abuse Web Sites Offer Escape Link; Button Swaps Page to Mislead Abusers

By Jamie Francisco, Tribune staff reporter, francisco@tribune.com

Along with information about emergency services and shelter, the Web site of a northwest suburban agency that helps victims of domestic abuse now offers an escape button for women worried about their safety.

The button, which appears on the Web sites of Palatine-based Women In Need Growing Stronger and other agencies across the country, is intended to help victims temporarily camouflage Internet research efforts and avoid arousing the suspicion of the abusers they are attempting to flee.

Click on the "ESCAPE" button on the computer screen, and the Google search page appears, providing instant cover for a woman searching the Internet for information on how to deal with abuse.

"If somebody were to come up behind them, they're at least able to escape for that moment, to show they were working on something else," said Jennifer Djordjevic, spokeswoman for WINGS, which added the escape button to its Web site in April.

Agencies that assist domestic-violence victims began adding the escape feature on their Web sites about four years ago when staff members realized that abusers were gleaning information from computer-generated Internet search histories to stalk and harass victims, said Cindy Southworth, director of technology at the National Network to End Domestic Violence. The network's escape button redirects to The Weather Channel.

In 2000, the Washington-based organization launched a campaign to educate staff of domestic-violence agencies about spyware technology, computer programs that save Web pages visited, including e-mails, Southworth said.

If installed on a personal computer, tech-savvy abusers can track the Internet habits of their victims – from e-mails to previewing bus schedules – that could clue them in on when their victim plans to leave, she said.

“All the emerging technologies, including Internet, wireless phones, electronic mail, have required that domestic violence-prevention advocates become tech-savvy,” Southworth said. “We need to understand these tools so we could help victims use them and understand how perpetrators are misusing these tools.”

It is not known how many Web sites of domestic-violence agencies feature an escape button, Southworth said.

She said that it probably is safer for victims to research their plans at a public location, such as a library, so their Internet search habits can't be tracked.

At home, an escape button could briefly shield them from being found out, she said. But using the button does not erase search-history information.

“The escape button is not foolproof,” Southworth said. “Anything you do on the Internet can be tracked. [The button] does help if somebody walks up to you in a coffee shop, but it does not protect you if your perpetrator has access to your computer at home or has remote access because they've installed a [spyware] product and they're monitoring you from afar.”

For domestic-violence victims who have computer access only at home, Southworth warns them not to change their Internet search habits, even if they discover they are being cyber-stalked. Any sudden changes in behavior could set off an abuser, she said.

“It could be lethal if all of a sudden the computer [history of visited Web sites] is cleared,” Southworth said. “It could tip off the abuser that she's aware he's been monitoring her and she's potentially making plans to leave. She's more likely to be seriously injured or killed at that time than any other time.”

Southworth has heard tales of victims who were tracked via global-positioning-satellite systems and of abusers who hacked into e-mail accounts to find out more information about their victims.

“Our biggest message when we talk to [the abused] is: Trust your instincts,” Southworth said. “If you think your abuser knows too much about you, it's possible they do, in this electronic age.”

While it is difficult to track how many domestic-violence victims have benefited from the escape button, feedback has been positive, said Rita Smith, executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, based in Denver.

“We periodically get e-mails from people thanking us for providing that resource,” Smith said.

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