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Domestic Violence Draws Spotlight; Cantwell Backs Continued Federal Help

By Tom Vogt, Columbian Staff Writer

Last year: Eight of the 15 homicides in Clark County were domestic-violence killings. The local SafeChoice program provided help in 2,705 new domestic-violence cases.

The local hot line took 7,651 domestic-violence calls.

And, almost 9,000 nights of shelter lodging were provided by SafeChoice.

That is the local face of a national problem being spotlighted by U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell this weekend. The Seattle-area Democrat stopped Saturday in Vancouver to support the renewal of a federal law first passed in 1994 to combat domestic violence.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 2005 was introduced Thursday and is headed for the Senate Judiciary Committee; Cantwell is a co-sponsor. The current law will expire at the end of the year.

“There is a lot of competition in a budget year,” Cantwell said during a visit to Clark County’s YWCA, where she met with police officials and people who work with anti-violence programs.

“But awareness of domestic violence can’t stop. With Washington, D.C.’s, busy agenda, we’re concerned that this might be put off,” Cantwell said.

The fact that about half of Clark County’s homicides in 2004 were rooted in domestic violence “is an astounding number,” Cantwell said.

And nationally, an average of three women are murdered every day by their husbands or boyfriends, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. So this is not the time to think that the problem has been solved, Cantwell said.

“We had 3,500 domestic-violence cases last year, and we have one full-time investigator,” said Vancouver Police Chief Brian Martinek. “That is unacceptable.”

In addition to enforcement, “We need prevention and education, and we have to rely on people like Sen. Cantwell for federal funding,” Martinek said.

Cantwell said the funding request will be about \$400 million for the 2006 fiscal year.

Locally, the federal grants have meant more than \$1 million for Clark County programs in the past 10 years, said Sherri Bennett, director of the SafeChoice program.

It includes the SafeChoice shelter, counseling, support for 341 victims who went to court last year, assistance in getting protection orders, and even business cards.

“We print 20,000 business cards a year and put them in women’s restrooms around the county,” Bennett said. “Sometimes, that’s the only place a woman can get away from a batterer.”

The money also has helped law enforcement agencies and the legal system, including training and equipment for police officers, said Vancouver Police Sgt. Mike Davis.

“The money is crucial, not just for the victims’ safety, but for the safety of the public and the officers,” Davis said.

Domestic violence “is a different crime, just by its nature. Most violence goes unreported, so the victims don’t call police until it’s the last resort,” Davis said. “The officer responds to a scene of escalating violence, where children might be present. It can be difficult to take statements, because the victim often doesn’t want the batterer to go to jail.”

Sometimes the stories will change, so cameras are needed to “bring the crime scene into the court room,” Davis said.

“Violence and threats can come in all kinds of ways, and the police must be as sophisticated as the batterers,” Davis said.

How sophisticated? The new version of the act would update criminal laws by prohibiting the use of new surveillance technology, including Global Positioning System equipment, by stalkers.

TO CALL The YWCA SafeChoice 24-hour-a-day hotline number is 360-695-0501.

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