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Domestic Violence an ‘Epidemic’ in Texas

By Heather L. Nicholson, Citizen staff

The number of Women in abusive relationships is at an all-time high, announced Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott Tuesday as he celebrated the start of a statewide help line with the Texas Council on Family Violence.

“(Domestic violence) is a growing and serious problem. As a state, we have to work together to combat it,” Abbott said.

Recently released statistics show that 140 Texas women died last year at the hands of an abusive partner, and that number has steadily increased each year from 1999. With the aid of a \$2 million grant from the Office of the Attorney General, TCFV has launched a 16-month bilingual public awareness campaign called “Break the Silence - Make the Call.”

The campaign is intended to educate the public on domestic violence and encourage an increase in reporting violence to authorities.

Abbott said he was astounded when he received the domestic violence statistics for 2003. A statewide survey revealed that 74 percent of Texans are or know someone who is a victim of domestic violence, and 35 percent learn about someone’s abuse and do nothing about it.

“It has now become an epidemic,” Abbott said. “I was astounded when I saw how many women lost their lives, and it is disappointing to see how many people know about it (and do nothing).”

Kita McGraw considers herself a domestic violence survivor after she sought refuge at The Bridge Over Troubled Waters in Pasadena.

“I had a distorted view of what love is and because of the confusion I chose men who were not healthy to be with,” she said.

McGraw’s life of abuse started as a small child when she was often the victim of physical, emotional and sexual abuse by her mother and her boyfriends. But it wasn’t

until a five-year relationship with an abusive boyfriend that she stopped the vicious cycle.

“He told me what to wear, how to talk, (whom) to talk to, and demanded sex daily like it was a chore, like washing the dishes,” she said. “Because he didn’t hit me, I didn’t think I was being abused and I stayed.”

McGraw entered The Bridge’s transitional program five years ago with her daughter and recently earned a nursing license and bought her first home.

“Don’t feel sorry for me. I don’t want people to remember me as a victim, but as a survivor,” she said.

The second phase of TCFV’s educational campaign is a statewide toll-free number that domestic violence victims and family and friends of victims can call. The first phase, launched in 2001, joined the Battered Women’s Movement of Texas to encourage victims to speak out against their abuser.

TCFV Executive Director Sheryl Cates said the “Break the Silence” campaign has been successful, and in three years has resulted in a 69 percent caller increase to their hotline and a staggering 93 percent increase from Spanish-speaking callers.

“It’s produced astonishing results so far. It’s created a direct connection between victims and their local provider. We have removed many barriers for women needing safety,” Cates said.

Public service announcements will begin airing this month in English and Spanish and \$1 million worth of print information will be distributed. The toll free telephone number is (800) 799-SAFE.

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