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Domestic Violence can be a Federal Crime

By Holly Danks, The Oregonian

When Robert William Neeper pointed a shotgun at his girlfriend, he probably didn't know he'd end up doing hard time in a federal prison.

The 32-year-old Aloha man was sent to the Federal Correctional Institution in Sheridan for 15 months under a seldom-used federal domestic violence law.

When U.S. District Court Judge James A. Redden sentenced Neeper in late July, it was only the 10th time the Domestic Violence Offender Gun Ban had been used in Oregon since it was passed in 1996.

"It's taken awhile to get everyone to know about it," said Fred Weinhouse, assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted the case under Project Safe Neighborhoods, a federal push against illegal gun use.

Neeper's Washington County probation officer referred the case to the U.S. attorney's office. Had Neeper been convicted in Washington County Circuit Court, the most he would have been looking at was six months in the county jail for a misdemeanor, Weinhouse said.

As the case was prosecuted federally, the charge was elevated to a felony. The federal statute makes it unlawful to possess, receive, ship, transport or purchase a firearm or ammunition if a person has been convicted of a misdemeanor crime involving domestic violence.

"Here's a guy who had three previous domestic violence convictions," Weinhouse said. "He is somebody with an explosive personality."

According to a 1992 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, domestic disputes involving a firearm are 12 times more likely to result in death than are assaults using other weapons.

Records show that in 1996, Neeper was sentenced to one year of probation for harassing his ex-wife. In 1997, he was convicted of menacing the same woman and got two years' probation and 10 days in jail. In 2002, he punched a girlfriend in the face and was sentenced to another year of probation and 30 days in jail.

The following year, in September 2003, Neeper got into an argument with the same girlfriend and pointed a shotgun at her. “The victim was terrified,” Weinhouse said.

Even if he hadn’t threatened her with the gun, Neeper could have been prosecuted federally for just having it, Weinhouse said.

“The important point is he had four domestic violence incidents,” Weinhouse said, “and finally something is done about it.”

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