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First Dating Violence Hotline for Teens Created

Teenagers, young adults will staff national service 24 hours a day

By The Associated Press

NEW YORK – Jessica Lee endured abuse from her high school boyfriend for two years, breaking up only after he burned her with cigarettes and slammed a beer bottle over her head. She has now joined an ambitious initiative to help teens in similar plights.

On Thursday, Lee and other former victims will be on hand in New York to help announce the creation of the first nationwide hotline specifically designed to combat the widespread problem of teen dating violence.

It will be run by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, which mostly serves adults with its current operations. Calls to the new line will be answered by teens, plus other young adults, in the belief that young abuse victims would be more comfortable confiding in someone their own age.

“I wrestled over telling people what was happening to me because I was ashamed,” said Lee, 19, who is now a freshman in Missouri State University’s pre-nursing program in her hometown of Springfield, Mo.

“I was in denial – I blamed myself,” she said in a telephone interview. “I wished there’d been somewhere to turn besides my family or friends – a hotline with someone I didn’t know but who understood.”

Sheryl Cates, executive director of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, said the existing line gets about 17,000 calls a month from across the country. About 10 percent are from teens, mostly concerned with dating violence.

Around-the-Clock Staffing

When fully functioning early next year, the new hotline will operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Teens will field calls from noon to 2 a.m, while young adults 18 to 24 will work overnight to serve college-age callers.

Lee, who is entering this year’s Miss Missouri USA beauty contest, will discuss dating violence

as part of her pageant presentation.

“When it was happening, I thought I was the only one going through it,” she said. “Now I know otherwise.”

Cates anticipates roughly 1,000 calls a month to the new line. Her center in Austin, Texas, will be recruiting dozens of new staff members – some volunteer, some paid – to handle the calls after undergoing about 60 hours of training.

“It’s our job to be sure they’re not on the line until they have the skill and maturity to handle a really tough call,” Cates said.

One prerequisite is patience: Cates said calls from teens to the existing hotline average more than 20 minutes in length, twice that of adult calls.

Cates said there are only a few regional hotlines specializing in coping with teen dating violence. The head of a nonprofit running one such line welcomed the prospect of a national service.

“Absolutely, it’s needed,” said Stephanie Flaherty of the battered-women’s support group DOVE in Quincy, Mass. “A lot of teens want to talk about what’s happening to them, but they’re afraid of it getting back to their parents.”

Verbal and Physical Abuse

Dating violence is hard to quantify; it can range from verbal abuse to physical assault. But experts agree it’s widespread.

In Texas, half of all teenagers and young adults have experienced dating violence, either as target or abuser, according to a survey released in August by the state attorney general. A recent national survey by Teenage Research Unlimited found that one-third of teen girls in a dating relationship have feared for their physical safety.

Jill Murray, a psychotherapist from Laguna Niguel, Calif., who has written about dating violence, said the problem is worsening, in part because of coarse youth culture. She also described a new form of dating abuse, using cell phones.

“You’ve got boyfriends sending scary and demeaning text messages, sometimes in the middle of the night,” she said. “The girl must sleep with her cell phone on vibrate, so her parents don’t hear it, and she must answer his message or face bad consequences.”

Ready to Get Help

Murray said the new hot line could benefit girls who seek advice but aren’t ready to forsake their boyfriend.

“Maybe they call to find out how to make him change, but they don’t want to get him in

trouble,” Murray said. “The hot line is a perfect anonymous way to seek help.”

Among the ex-victims joining Jessica Lee on Thursday in New York will be a 17-year-old high school student from Palo Alto, Calif., whose abusive relationship with a varsity football player ended after he kicked her across a room, causing a concussion.

Sarah, whose family has asked that her last name be withheld, said a dismaying aspect of her ordeal was lack of support from friends when she finally reported the abuse. Some threw eggs at her house; others contended she was wrong to get her boyfriend in trouble.

“There was no one my own age to talk to,” she said.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline operates with public and private funds. Clothing maker Liz Claiborne Inc. has pledged \$1 million over several years to launch the teen hot line.

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