



National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE HOLIDAYS

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

DECEMBER 2011

With the holiday season approaching, questions arise about the connection between domestic violence and distinctive holidays. Guidance from the NRC DV Technical Assistance Team follows.

Last year, the NRC DV released a similar [Technical Assistance Guidance](#) to the field, highlighting available data on the prevalence of domestic violence during the holidays (the time period beginning the week of Thanksgiving through New Year's Day). To date, there is no comprehensive national study linking the holidays with an increase in domestic violence. Most of the available information continues to be anecdotal or opinion pieces reflecting the experiences of advocates at a particular shelter program or law enforcement agencies in a given community. Also, an analysis of statistics from small studies and available data on calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline indicates some contradictory patterns.

Summary of Available Data

- A 2005 study examining police incident reports of domestic violence in Idaho suggests that there is a strong relationship between particular holidays and incidence reports of IPV (intimate partner violence).¹ This study found that domestic violence reports are higher than the normal daily average on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, with New Year's Day averaging 2.7 times more incidents of domestic violence than the normal daily average.
- A 2010 study examining calls for law enforcement assistance in a large U.S. city also found that the number of incidents reported was higher on New Year's Day compared to the daily average.²
- On the other hand, looking at data from the [National Domestic Violence Hotline \(NDVH\)](#)³ for the years 2004 through 2010 indicates that the number of hotline calls drops dramatically during the holidays. For instance, call volume drops by approximately half on Thanksgiving Day. Call volume decreases by an average of 53% on Christmas Day and 30% on New Year's Day (see additional information on page 5).

¹ Vasquez, S. P., Stohr, M. K., Purkiss, M. (2005). Intimate partner violence incidence and characteristics: Idaho NIBRS 1995 to 2001 data. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 16(1), 99-114.

² Joshi, M., & Sorenson, S. B. (2010). Intimate partner violence at the scene: Incident characteristics and implications for public health surveillance. *Evaluation Review*, 34(2), 116-136.

³ NDVH provides a very different data source than is used in the other two studies. While the two studies examine law enforcement statistics, NDVH call data reflect individuals reaching out on a toll-free helpline for assistance, including victims, friends and family, and less frequently, offenders. Also, data analyzed by the three sources referenced here are from different time periods.

Despite the limited and inconclusive data available, many communities experience increased media and public attention to domestic violence during the holidays. Advocates can use this opportunity to increase public awareness that domestic violence does not stop during the holidays and that the abuse and violence experienced by victims may be exacerbated (although not caused) by the financial stress and alcohol consumption that often accompany the holidays.

Providing Support during the Holidays

Victims and survivors may experience additional stress and unique challenges over the holiday season and may turn to advocates for needed support. The following are some considerations for working with survivors and their families during this time.

- Survivors may need additional emotional support from advocates, counselors, and helplines during the holiday season, especially if they are unable to be with their family, friends or faith community, or if they are grieving the loss of a loved one due to domestic violence.
- The holidays can be emotionally and physically draining. Shelters may need to allow time for respite, quiet talks and other forms of relaxation, such as walking, yoga, and meditation. Meditation can be as simple as taking a few minutes out of a busy day to breath or sit in quiet contemplation. Slowing down and tuning into oneself may help someone stay grounded.
- The importance of safety planning around the holidays should not be underestimated. Advocates can help keep the season safe for survivors by sharing with them some holiday-specific safety tips, including starting new holiday routines, meeting family and friends in new locations unknown to the abusive partner, avoiding shopping areas and/or holiday parades and events where survivors may unexpectedly see their abusers, and using a P.O. box address, or no return address at all, if sending out holidays cards.
- Shelter staff may be instrumental in helping families begin new routines by organizing holiday themed activities at the shelter, especially for those families or residents that cannot be with their loved ones. In doing so, strive for inclusiveness, keeping in mind that not everyone observes the same holidays (or any holiday at all), and that every culture celebrates the holidays with its own unique traditions. Advocates can research and learn about a broad range of holiday observances so they can be prepared to support victims and survivors from different populations.

Here are ideas of simple, easy to organize activities:

- Encourage families to talk about their holiday memories during group discussions (for both mothers and children); validate those feelings and help them process their concerns going forward
- Include shelter residents in decorating the facility for the holidays, with special attention to diverse holiday traditions

- Organize group transportation to a local shopping center or discount retail store for families to shop for gift-giving
- Help mothers in the shelter select and wrap donated gifts for their children
- Host a holiday eve dessert party, a holiday brunch, or New Year's dinner; volunteers may be able to help with meal preparation, cooking and serving
- Plan a movie night for the families and watch holiday themed films
- Set-up age appropriate stations throughout the facility with holiday themed coloring books, puzzles, games, reading books, music, and other materials.

Considerations for Working with Survivors from Specific Populations

Making domestic violence services more supportive and accessible to different populations during the holiday season can make a big difference in the lives of these families.

- **Immigrant survivors.** Advocates should understand and honor the unique circumstances that affect the experiences of these survivors. Remember that individuals from other cultural/ethnic backgrounds may observe holidays differently. Avoid making generalizations and promote inclusiveness through linguistically accessible practices. Keep in mind that this may also be a particularly difficult time to be away from family members and friends for immigrant survivors. Communication with their loved ones via phone or Internet may not be possible for security and other reasons. Inquiring about the legal status of immigrant victims is not the role of domestic violence victim advocates and should not be part of any intake process.
- **Survivors with disabilities/Deaf survivors.** Making sure that holiday events are accessible to all survivors receiving services is paramount. Be aware that there are multiple dimensions to accessibility when planning an event or providing domestic violence services in general. Test your plans in advance through the lens of physical, programmatic, communication and attitudinal accessibility. Make all of the activities, including holiday celebrations, as inclusive and accessible as possible. Providing interpreters and/or closed captioning can make a significant difference for a Deaf survivor. Be sure that holiday decorations do not impede the physical space or become obstacles for survivors using assistive devices. Remember that in many instances, abusers use the disability or deafness as weapons to control victims. Avoid practices that could unintentionally promote these dynamics.
- **LGBTQ survivors.** For many LGBTQ survivors, "coming out" to family members may not be a possibility and the holiday season could prove particularly difficult for these survivors. For example, going home and celebrating with family might not have been an option even before the abuse began in the relationship. Or if these survivors are able to spend time with their families, they may not be able to talk openly about their relationship and experience with abuse to obtain additional, needed support. Be mindful of these challenges when planning events and delivering services. Strive to honor *all* families and traditions.

- **Abused military spouses.** Although military families are able to receive services through specific branches of the military, spouses in abusive situations may also be accessing civilian domestic violence programs. The holiday season could be challenging for these survivors for a number of reasons. They may still be in contact with an abusive partner to continue receiving benefits for themselves and their children or both may be enlisted service members. Guilt for leaving the abusive military spouse, especially if s/he returned from the war with a brain injury or PTSD, may add to these challenges. Be aware of these issues and provide additional supports if necessary.

Expanding Organizational Capacity During the Holidays

Many people find it fulfilling to give and reach out to others who may be in greater need than themselves, especially during the holidays. Most hotlines, victim advocacy or shelter organizations will benefit from volunteer time, financial support or other donations. Managing the influx of volunteers during this busy time of year can be challenging, but taking the following steps can help.

- **Assessing agency needs.** What type of help do we need (childcare, clerical, maintenance, transportation, life skills, mentoring, etc.)? What skills should our volunteers have to meet these needs? These are proactive questions any program should ask itself. While utilizing volunteer services during the holidays requires some flexibility on the part of the agency, it is important to identify the areas in which help is needed and to provide prospective volunteers with specific guidelines to help them determine if they are able or willing to perform the job duties.
- **Building the agency's capacity.** If possible, have a plan and resources in place before potential volunteers knock on the door, such as developing detailed job descriptions and instituting a system to manage volunteers' time and efforts. Being aware of the laws, regulations and requirements that apply to the organization, the volunteers, as well as the victims and survivors served by the program are critical. For example, is the agency required to have volunteers working with children or adults fingerprinted or to complete a background check? What are the state and federal liability protections for volunteers? The organization may need to seek professional advice in order to answer some of the legal questions that may arise. Recruiting and training a volunteer (or paid staff) with the qualifications and commitment to serve as Volunteer Coordinator is also a good practice and can serve the agency well during the busy holiday season.
- **Making sure volunteers come back.** After expanding its pool of volunteers during the holidays, following a thorough screening process and initial orientation and training, the organization has an interest in ensuring that volunteers keep coming back. Once volunteers are on board, adequate orientation, ongoing in-service training, as well as hands-on supervision and feedback is vital. Volunteers should also receive adequate recognition for their contributions, which can be done in person, at appreciation events and through annual reports and newsletters.

Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the Hotline

These statistics represent the experience of the National Domestic Violence Hotline only. Representatives of state and local programs, along with representatives of law enforcement and medical staff, may have different seasonal experiences with victims and survivors of domestic violence.

Table A: Thanksgiving Holidays—Number of National Calls to the Hotline, 2004-2010

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
The Week of Thanksgiving	2270	2312	3151	3285	3487	3546	4741
	2660	2863	3724	3829	4090	4189	5257
The Week After	2779	2752	3596	3759	3831	4102	5432
	2660	2863	3724	3829	4090	4189	5257
Thanksgiving Day	146	166	239	290	332	341	376
	380	409	532	547	584	598	751

Number at the Top of the Cell = Holiday Number of Calls

Number at the Bottom of the Cell = Average Number of Calls Received in a Typical Week or Day

Table B: Christmas and New Year's Holidays—Number of National Calls to the Hotline, 2004-2010

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Dec 15 to Jan 1	5660	5625	7403	8540	10094	8367	12259
	6840	7362	9846	9846	10512	10764	13518
Jan 2 to Jan 15	5935	5956	7563	8415	9413	7511	10702
	5320	5726	7658	7658	8176	8372	10514
Christmas Eve	192	184	234	370	452	304	470
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751
Christmas Day	135	160	208	270	394	258	374
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751
New Years Eve	276	243	283	523	669	422	569
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751
New Years Day	260	236	342	428	508	341	604
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751

Number at the Top of the Cell = Holiday Number of Calls

Number at the Bottom of the Cell = Average Number of Calls Received in a Typical Week or Day

The NRC DV welcomes your input. If you are aware of additional supporting or contradictory data, please contact our Technical Assistance Team at <http://www.nrcdv.org/TARquest.php>.