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## Support Group Raises Awareness about Stalking

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By Anna Krejci

Small gifts an admirer leaves in a doorway or on a car seat might seem harmless, but advocates against stalking said the behavior could lead to a much worse outcome.

Seventy-six percent of women killed by intimate partners were stalked before being killed, according to the National Center for Victims of Crime.

The 14-member Stalking Resource Committee of Brown County raises awareness about stalking, a felony, and has created a local support group for victims.

The support group began meeting in the summer of 2004 with five Brown County women attending. Beginning in January, meetings will take place monthly.

The support group is unique to the area, advocates said.

The Stalking Resource Committee of Brown County support group is different in that an individual does not have to be a victim of domestic abuse to attend, said Angie Flannery, the committee's co-chair.

Local support groups for domestic violence lend support to victims who also have been stalked, but stalking can be the precursor to more serious crimes, said Catherine Lenninger, a Lutheran Social Services employee who volunteers as the support group's leader.

Lenninger said the group welcomes victims of stalking related to domestic abuse in addition to people who feel they are victims of stalking.

The definition of stalking is behavior that causes "a reasonable person" to be afraid.

Lenninger cited several examples of stalking.

Women are scared when a stalker leaves them a gift inside their car, property that is supposed to be private, she said.

At first the gift might seem like an apology, but when gifts are refused the stalker becomes angry, sometimes verbally insulting an individual, she added.

Victims of stalking begrudge the fact they have to change their lives by moving or living with family to evade a stalker when they have done nothing wrong.

“They resent that quite a bit,” Lenninger said, because they perceive those changes as undeserved punishment.

Besides offering support and bolstering a victim’s confidence to seek help from law enforcement, the support group wants to see alleged stalkers taken to court.

The support group is important, if not to the broader community, to the victims of stalking, Flannery said.

“Sometimes victims question whether they’re overreacting to behavior,” she said, adding the support group shows them that others experience the same fright from similar behaviors.

When determining whether behavior towards them is stalking, “I always very much encourage them to trust their own instincts,” Lenninger said.

If someone is fearful of another’s actions, something is not right, she added.

Most people who benefit from the support group already have professional counseling. If not, the support group might be able to find more help for an individual, Lenninger said.

The Stalking Resource Committee of Brown County support group also facilitates dialogue between the victims and law enforcement.

John Flannery, directed law enforcement officer in Allouez, is co-chair of the Brown County committee on stalking.

He believes stalking is underreported and that law enforcement officers have trouble recognizing it.

“I just think there are different perceptions on how people view stalking,” John said. Many officers misunderstand the law and they tell victims to change things they do, but that does not correct the stalker’s behavior, John said.

If a victim reports that a stalker phones her repeatedly, sometimes the officer just tells the victim to change her phone number, he said.

By the time a victim contacts law enforcement authorities, the victim feels he or she cannot do anything else to change the situation, John said, adding police need to listen to the victims.

In Brown County, law enforcement authorities respond reasonably well to the dangers of stalking, partly because the area is not a large metropolis and they dedicate more time to individuals, John said.

He also said viewpoint changes in law enforcement reflect changes in society's ideas.

The area is still conservative, and society tends to mistake stalking as misunderstandings or squabbles between couples, John said. He added, "When a woman says she is scared, we need to believe her."

Every year one in 12 women and one in 45 men are stalked, according to the National Center for Victims of Crime.

John said victims need to keep a journal of their stalker's actions, save answering machine messages, contact law enforcement as soon as they feel threatened and tell other people to watch for their stalker's behavior so they can testify in court.

An informational presentation of stalking will be given at the Allouez Village Hall, 1649 S. Webster Ave., at 6:30 p.m. Jan. 17. January is National Stalking Awareness Month.

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