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With Domestic Violence, Screening Can Save Lives

Guest Column by Janis M. Harvey

Like everyone else in Anne Arundel County, we at the YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County were sickened by the Ivy Mayhew homicide. But unlike many others, we were not surprised.

The YWCA sees victims of domestic violence like Ms. Mayhew every day in our legal services department, our counseling center and at our shelter where, last year, more than 2,000 women and their children sought safety and services.

Between June 2004 and June 2005, 70 women, children and men died in Maryland as a result of domestic violence.

Many people seek protective orders from the local courts. In this county's District Court alone, there were nearly 2,000 such orders filed in 2005.

Judges issue protective orders to limit an abuser's contact with the victim. Such an order might forbid an abuser from contacting or attempting to contact a victim. "Contact" is further specified to include "in person, by phone, in writing or by any other means."

Recently added were the words: "Except to facilitate any child visitation ordered in the custody provision of the protective order."

Protective orders are extremely important, as they are often the first court record of abuse. It is imperative that women continue to seek them.

But they have limitations. To uphold one, you must call in a violation to the police and have them come out to enforce it. Anything can happen in those minutes while you are calling the police or waiting for them to arrive.

In addition, the order must be kept with you at all times, because the police need to see a copy of the paperwork in order to enforce it.

Victims are relieved to receive a protective order. But it alone is not sufficient. Victims must recognize the danger they face. But most simply cannot believe the person they love is capable of murder.

When victims hear threats like “I am going to kill you” or “If I can’t have you, no one will,” they find it impossible to comprehend that he might mean what he says.

A protective order is simply not enough. A piece of paper cannot stop a bullet or a knife.

Dr. Jacqueline Campbell, an associate dean for faculty affairs and a professor at Johns Hopkins University’s school of nursing, has amassed 25 years of research on this subject.

Her work shows that a screening process would have recognized the danger facing 87 percent of those killed through domestic violence, and 92 percent of those nearly killed.

She found that the risk of assault is reduced by 60 percent if the victim goes to a shelter. At least half of the victims who died had prior contact with law enforcement.

Dr. Campbell’s research also tells us that 96 percent of women in lethal situations nationwide contacted police, the court system or a hospital emergency room - but had no contact with a domestic violence service or advocate. Changing that percentage could make the difference between life and death.

Dr. Campbell interviewed the friends and family of domestic violence victims who were killed, and victims who were nearly killed. And she made a startling discovery.

These victims sustained injuries serious enough to send them to the emergency room. They had called the police numerous times. Families feared for their safety.

But these victims had never called their local domestic violence hotline or talked to a domestic violence advocate. If they had taken this step, they would have learned just how much danger they were in.

I won’t list all the predictors here, because an experienced and trained responder best administers the screening process.

Domestic violence is about power and control. There are some red flags, such as the partner being unemployed, children being in the home that he knows are not his, and attempts to strangle the female partner. These are strong indicators of a potentially lethal situation.

Women who contact our domestic violence programs are offered an opportunity to complete a lethality screen. Their answers can reliably predict behavior that has led to homicide among domestic violence victims. This lifesaving device allows trained and experienced advocates to evaluate a victim’s level of danger and help her or him to create a safety plan.

Ms. Mayhew may have believed she was safe once she had secured the protective order. It was reported to the bail review judge that Ms. Mayhew had twice been asked if she feared her husband. Twice, she said no.

This is what she truly believed. But we at the YWCA wonder whether she would have answered the question differently if she had previously met with an advocate and had taken the lethality screen. That is the crux of the matter.

The YWCA – through its attorneys, its counseling center, its legal advocates and its hotline – offers lethality screening to women and men, free of charge. Call the YWCA hotline at 410-222-6800 or come into the center at 1517 Ritchie Highway in Arnold and ask to talk to a counselor. Having this information might save your life.

The writer is the chief executive officer of the YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County.

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