

CHARLESTON GAZETTE (West Virginia)

February 25, 2004

Women Not the Only Targets of Stalkers, Conference Told

Chris Wetterich chriswetterich@wvgazette.com

Stalking is not a problem that only women face, although they bear the brunt of it, experts told the West Virginia Conference on Stalking on Tuesday.

The conference was sponsored by the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the West Virginia Division of Criminal Justice Services, the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services, and the U.S. attorney's office.

The conference consisted of workshops and sessions to educate victim advocates and criminal justice professionals how to identify and effectively respond to victims of stalking.

"No matter how careful you think you are, you can be a victim," said Jayne Hitchcock, an expert on stalking over the Internet, who was once a victim herself.

Panelists discussed whether there is ever a harmless kind of stalking.

"Stalking is behavior that causes fear," said Tracy Bahm, head of the Stalking Resource Center. "Once you have fear, it's no longer harmless."

Stalking is also a prevalent factor in other crimes, including domestic violence, rape and murder, Bahm said.

Bahm said 76 percent of women who were killed by an intimate partner were stalked in the 12 months preceding the crime. Eighty-five percent of women whose intimate partners attempted to kill them were stalked during the previous year.

For a person to be guilty of stalking, West Virginia law requires two of three factors: repeatedly following the victim, harassing the victim or making threats against the victim. If only one factor is present, the person can't be guilty of stalking, said Mark Neil, an assistant prosecutor in Raleigh County.

The penalties for stalking range from a misdemeanor count carrying six months in jail to a one-to five-year felony sentence for repeat offenders, Neil said. There are also federal laws against stalking.

Of special concern at the conference was cyberstalking that occurs online. Experts said parents need to be cognizant of their child's Internet activities. Parents should also be wary of how much information a child puts into their instant messenger profile.

"They should feel comfort letting you know their password," Hitchcock said. "Let them know you're there for them to come to if something happens. The worst thing you can do is freak out and say, 'You're never allowed online again.'"

FBI Special Agent Joseph Ciccarella said people need to understand how much access stalkers have to them through the Internet.

"Every creep that's out there can come into your house through the telephone line," he said.

On the Net:

Stalking Resource Center: www.ncvc.org/src

Working to Halt Online Abuse: www.haltabuse.org

To contact staff writer Chris Wetterich, use e-mail or call 348-3023.

Copyright 2004 Charleston Newspapers