

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Domestic violence is a national pastime

While we self-righteously condemn other countries for their treatment of women, consider the following grim statistics:

- According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, every 8 seconds, somewhere in America, a woman is beaten.
- Domestic violence is a serious problem in 50 to 60 percent of all American marriages.
- 60 percent percent of battered women are beaten while they are pregnant.
- 40 percent of homicides in the United States are related to domestic violence.
- 46 percent of all women murdered in the United States are killed by their spouse/lover.
- 98 percent of all domestic violence involves a male abusing a female.
- In one-half of families where domestic violence occurs, the children are battered as well.
- Spouse abuse is learned. More than half the children who witness violence in the home become either abused or abusive.

This Christmas over 100 children are in the domestic violence program of Safe Harbor Family Crisis Center, located in Galesburg. Last year 360 new adult clients were served by this agency. Services of Safe Harbor are free of charge and the agency, with seven staff members, is supported by State grants and donations from the community. Rumors abound that this is one of the agencies targeted for nonsupport by the "coalition" trying to take control of Knox County United Way. The "coalition" denies it, but few believe them.

Safe Harbor staff members, Kathy Richardson, executive director; Di Di Drake, court advocate, and Patti Estep, IDVA legal aid (Illinois Domestic Violence Act) spoke to me about domestic violence in general and specifically about holiday time.

"It's not uncommon for our shelter to be empty on Christmas day," said Estep. "In our society, kids are told if they are good, Santa will come and mom doesn't want to take the kids away from Santa, gifts, the tree and other family, even their father."

The women said that batterers won't do anything abusive while other family members are around, so it is a relatively safe time for the mothers and children. After Christmas, however, is when a mother and her children may be able to get away because other family members are there and able to help. In some cases, family members don't know about the abuse.

Some victims even take the risk of going back to the home for Christmas because it is a family time. Staff members stressed that batterers, contrary to popular belief, do not lose control and become violent. Domestic violence is not an act of anger, but of power and control. The abuser makes a conscious choice to use violence to obtain or maintain power and control over his victim. Otherwise, they ask, why don't batterers abuse co-workers or other people with whom they have contact? The answer is: because they can't get away with it. They can get away with abusing their spouses and children.

"These men believe they have a right to manipulate and control their partner," said Drake.

"It's difficult to change a belief system. Batter intervention programs sometimes take years. The abuse is so controlled that we have some abusers who only choke their victims in the winter when a turtleneck will hide the marks."

Can abusers be changed? It depends on the length and severity of the abuse. "When you have a man who holds a gun to his wife's head, pulls the trigger and then laughs because there are no bullets in it, this man will probably not change," said Estep.

Community members, churches, community organizations and businesses have filled the office with gifts, wrapping

paper and food for Safe Harbor clients and their children. Before Christmas, Safe Harbor hosts an annual Christmas party with Santa and gifts for the clients and their children. Clients then come into the office to collect presents, gift-wrap, holiday decorations and food items to create their own Christmas day at home. Richardson said that Safe Harbor "works to help provide as close to a traditional Christmas as possible for the families we serve."

Estep added, "We can offer the true spirit of Christmas - peace. Women can return to a home free of violence."

Safe Harbor helps the victim move quickly to safety and take the legal action necessary to have the abuser removed from the home and an order of protection issued. The judge must determine the hardship of who should leave the home, but usually the mother and her children are allowed to remain. Then the victim and children may return from their temporary "safe house" to their home.

Questions asked of a potential victim are: Does your partner call you bad names and put you down? — Isolate you from friends and family? — control what you do, who you see, where you go? — prevent you from having or keeping a job? — hit, slap, punch, choke, kick or bite you? — use your children against you or threaten to take them away? — intimidate you with guns, knives or other weapons? — blame you for his violent actions? — force you to have sex against your will? — threaten to injure you, the children or themselves if you leave?

Domestic violence is a family issue, because it includes spousal abuse, date violence, child abuse or elder abuse. It can happen to anyone, regardless of employment or educational level or economic status. We often assume it is a problem of the poor and uneducated. This is not true.

"Law enforcement's response is much better than it has been in the past," says Estep. "They are getting more domestic violence training. And the laws have changed. They have to arrest if there are signs of injury." Drake added, "Not only have the laws changed, but we need to use them to their full extent in order to better serve victims. Sometimes, those arrested for drunk driving get more jail time and fines than a batterer."

Statistically, say staff members, a batterer who is prosecuted is less likely to repeat the offense. They've been told their actions are unacceptable. The Safe Harbor Family Crisis Center provides a 24 hour Crisis Hotline, safe temporary shelter to domestic violence victims and their dependents, legal advocacy, emotional support, group support, children's programs, transportation, information and referrals and safety planning and community resources. "We don't make decisions for our clients, we give them options," said Drake.

Staff members offer community education and professional training at hospitals, law enforcement departments and the schools. "And we'll talk about our program to anyone, anywhere," said Drake.

Kathy Richardson, executive director, said, "We receive tremendous support from churches, community organizations, schools and individuals. We would like to encourage the community to attend the United Way annual meeting on January 16 at 3 pm to ensure that funding and programs like ours are not jeopardized. The meeting will be held in the Memorial Gym at Knox College. We're closing our office that day at 2:30 pm, so we can all be there."

The crisis hotline number is 343-SAFE (7233).

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