

Domestic Violence Victims Suffer Greater Abuse During Tough Economic Times

By Jennifer Caruso

With National Domestic Violence Awareness Month coming up in October, RPCC's Victim Advocacy & Support Program invites members of the Rogers Park community to join efforts to eradicate domestic violence in the 49th Ward and throughout the city. For information about how to assist victims in need and do your part, call 773.338.7733. —Ed.

As we face one of the most challenging economic environments of recent memory, unemployment rates across the nation are sky high. While the economy does not directly cause domestic violence, research does indicate that the stress of unemployment puts an enormous strain on relationships, which contributes to a drastic increase in domestic violence incidents. The unemployment rate in the City of Chicago is currently around 10 percent. However, as that figure only reflects those registered in the unemployment system, the actual rate is much higher.

The lethality rate is even higher for domestic violence victims during an economic downturn. When times are good, violence is not as severe. The Rogers Park Community Council's Victim Advocacy & Support Program (VASP) is receiving more and more referrals of cases involving female victims who have been physically threatened or injured by the batterer with a variety of weapons including knives, guns, chains, hammers and even shovels.

VASP has also noticed an increase in cases involving choking of a victim. An offender applies strangulation to silence a victim; the act of strangulation exemplifies an offender's power and control over a victim. Many of these brutal attacks occur in front of children.

Ebony Dill serves as coordinator of research and evaluation with Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services. "I definitely see an increase in calls to our hotline," notes Dill, referring to the city's toll-free, multilingual, confidential Domestic Violence Help Line which is operated around the clock. Kathy Doherty, executive director for local nonprofit Between Friends, has also noticed a major increase in that agency's caseload. "The staff at Between Friends is seeing more women in crisis experiencing more intensive and prolonged violence," explains Doherty. "We suspect one major reason for this is the current state of the economy, which has both diminished women's options and reduced available domestic violence services. In 2008, we had to turn away close to 30 clients due to the ongoing impact and stress of the economy."

When a batterer's life becomes turbulent because of severe financial problems, lack of employment, decrease in self-esteem and other factors, abusive behavior escalates and becomes more deadly. Batterers spend more time inside the home while unemployed, which leads to an increase in the number of children witnessing horrific acts of domestic violence. Ten years ago, victims found it much easier to remove themselves and their children away from an abusive situation. However, it is strikingly more difficult these days for a victim to find a means of support to allow for an exit from an abusive situation. Moreover, family members, friends and neighbors find themselves less able to help as they too are caught in bad economic situations.

VASP has been serving victims of violent crime in Rogers Park and nearby communities for over 20 years. Victims residing within the 20th District, which includes the Edgewater community, have been served by VASP legal advocates for over 10 years. (Due to a unique partnership with the Chicago Police Department 20th and 24th Districts, VASP receives a referral every time police make a report involving domestic abuse.)

Although the daily tasks of a legal advocate are neither easy nor glamorous, VASP staff members remain extremely passionate and proactive about providing victims with a better alternative and breaking the cycle of domestic violence. Advocates Rebekah Jones and Sonia Zuniga help

clients reach their number-one goal, which is to live free from abuse by a partner and to remain outside the cycle of violence.

During the last fiscal year (July 2008 to June 2009), VASP assisted over 450 victims with such services as crisis counseling (355 victims), assistance obtaining orders of protection (170), criminal justice advocacy (314 victims), and direct referrals (376) to resources throughout the city. Thanks to a partnership with Collier Lock Service (6142 N. Clark) and the Chicago Police Department's Community Policing Program (CAPS), VASP also provided lock and/or door replacement to 8 victims of Rogers Park and Edgewater.

For assistance or more information, call Jennifer Caruso at 773.338.7733, x15 or email jennifer@rogerspark.org. All services are strictly confidential. The City of Chicago toll-free, 24-hour Domestic Violence Help Line is 877.863.6338 (TTY: 877.863.6339).

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