

Confronting domestic violence

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Viewpoint

Jonathan W. Blodgett

During the last several weeks, from every corner of the state, newspaper headlines have reminded us time and again that domestic violence is an epidemic in today's society.

Here in Essex County on Sept.28, we read in the Gloucester Daily Times, "Man charged in brutal assault on girlfriend." The Lawrence Eagle-Tribune front page headline on Oct. 21 read, "Lawrence couple dead in apparent murder-suicide."

Tragically and too often, domestic violence is a murder waiting to happen. This year in Essex County there have been six domestic violence murders. In three instances, the killer then took his own life.

Back in 1993, Gov. William Weld declared a state of emergency for women after 39 women were killed at the hands of domestic abusers. It distresses me to report that despite our best efforts, we are on pace to far surpass that number in 2007, because there is an average of one domestic homicide in Massachusetts every week.

Those victims and the scores of battered women fighting to survive and escape abusive relationships are the reasons I and my fellow district attorneys will be unrelenting in our battle for the passage of Senate Bill 62. That legislation, which I initially filed as district attorney-elect in 2002, would allow for concurrent jurisdiction in domestic violence cases. It doubles the potential prison sentence for domestic abusers from 2 1/2 years in the house of correction to five years in state prison.

Those victims and their children are why police, my office, the courts and victims' service agencies must work collaboratively to help abuse victims escape homes laced with brutality and fear, and put domestic terrorists behind bars.

We know that 50-70 percent of men who abuse their spouses also abuse their children. We know that one of every four women will be a victim of domestic violence during her lifetime. And we know that most batterers are serial batterers with multiple victims.

Until the late 1970s, domestic violence was a family secret to be kept, an issue to be dealt with behind closed doors. Domestic violence left its victims in terrified isolation. Survivors have told us, "I was not allowed to talk to my friends or family; He kept me isolated and the violence escalated; Even close friends don't know; you stay because of fear."

Their fear is justified. When a women attempts to leave a violent relationship, it is a dangerous time because the abuser realizes he's losing control. But with a safety plan, with assistance from police and the criminal justice system, family and friends, and agencies such as HAWC and the Jean Geiger Crisis Center, safely leaving a violent relationship is possible.

Protective orders (209A orders) can be issued to keep abusers away from the home and workplace, to order them to have no contact with and stay away from the victim, to make them surrender all firearms and an FID cards, and make them subject to arrest should they violate the restraining order.

Only through support for domestic violence victims from every entity, the swift and sure prosecution of batterers and continuing educational efforts will we stop this generational cycle of violence.

In whatever way you can, whether it is volunteering at a hotline, a shelter or simply picking up the phone and calling police when you hear a neighbor in distress, please join me and so many other dedicated people in our efforts to stop the pain, and to save innocent lives.

Jonathan W. Blodgett is district attorney of Essex County.