

DA wants tougher penalty for domestic abusers

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By Edward Mason

Staff writer

BOSTON - Warning of a growing domestic murder "crisis" in Massachusetts, Essex County District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett is calling on Beacon Hill lawmakers to increase the punishment for domestic abuse.

Blodgett wants the Legislature to nearly double sentences for dangerous repeat domestic abusers, a measure he's pushed for four years without success. With the statewide annual record for 39 domestic murders shattered earlier this year, Blodgett said it's time for the Legislature to act.

"We've had 51 domestic murders (this year), which is appalling," Blodgett said.

Under Blodgett's bill, judges could sentence repeat offenders - so-called "serial abusers" - to up to five years in state prison. Right now, the stiffest sentence is 21/2 years in the county house of correction. Longer sentences would keep batterers off the street and away from their victims, Blodgett said.

"We would keep people from being murdered," Blodgett said. "And we'd give a very strong signal that you could go to prison for five years."

Blodgett's office said there were six women murdered in domestic disputes in Essex County in 2007, equaling the number for 2006 with three weeks left in the year. In 2005, there were three domestic murders in Essex County, according to Blodgett's office.

Among the Essex County domestic murders was the Oct. 20 killing of Flora Acosta, 39, who was allegedly killed by her estranged boyfriend, Francisco Santiago, in Lawrence. Santiago allegedly shot Acosta and then killed himself. The pair was found by their 10-year-old son.

Blodgett said batterers often "groom" their victims, picking women who are emotionally or financially vulnerable and assaulting them repeatedly over the course of many years. Blodgett said the five-year sentence would give women a chance to get away from their abusers and hopefully prevent murders.

Blodgett wouldn't blame county sheriffs for not doing enough to change the behavior of batterers incarcerated in houses of correction. He placed the blame on the serial abusers, who he said "don't get it."

"They've made a choice," Blodgett said.

Asked to explain the spike in domestic abuse murders, he said, "We live in an angry society, and batterers are angry people."

Rep. John Keenan, D-Salem, is one of several area lawmakers backing the bill.

In the early 1990s, Keenan prosecuted domestic violence crimes in Lynn District Court. He said it was common for batterers to repeatedly attack one woman or have a pattern of

abusing a string of women. A tougher penalty would help prevent domestic violence from escalating.

"All assault and battery is serious," Keenan said. "But when you have a serial batterer, it is even more important to take that person off the street for a longer period of time."

Rep. Barry Finegold, D-Andover, is another lawmaker who wants the law changed. Finegold, who this year helped secure funding for a Spanish-language abuse help line in Lawrence, said fighting domestic violence has to be a legislative priority.

"When it comes to domestic abuse, we need to do as much as possible to protect those who have been abused and make sure those who do it don't do it again," Finegold said.

Moreover, by approving the measure, lawmakers would send a message to the victims of serial batterers.

"Oftentimes it's hard for a person who's been abused to come forward," said Sen. Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester. Tarr, a bill sponsor, said victims would be more likely to come forward and confront their attackers if "they know their effort to come forward won't be a waste."

The bill has twice passed the Senate but failed to clear the House.

For some issues, it's taken a tragedy to galvanize support for tougher laws. The death of 13-year-old Melanie Powell spurred quick passage of tougher drunken-driving laws in 2005. With a record-setting year for domestic murder, the conditions could be right for Blodgett's bill to pass.

"This year, it seems there's a heightened level of domestic abuse," Keenan said. "I think it's a good opportunity to say to batterers they may go away for a long time."