

## **Asking for help is the first step**

**The Newburyport Daily News**  
**December 12, 2006**

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All those involved with domestic abuse agree on one thing: If violence is about to occur or is occurring, pick up a phone and dial 911.

But for those in violent households who are dreading the stress the winter holidays bring, there may be avenues to take before danger occurs.

"Pick up the phone and make a call to a crisis center," said Jill Hrubes, a domestic violence victim. "Don't be afraid to ask for help."

There are crisis centers with 24-hour confidential hot lines in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and area police departments have skilled professionals who can help domestic abuse victims. They have free services and advice that can protect victims, including issues of physical safety and related financial and legal concerns.

These agencies can help not only those ready to leave their abusive environment, but also those who aren't ready to leave, for whatever reason.

Professionals urge victims to call one of a number of local agencies. Both Kelly Dunne, of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, and Jenny Sayer, of New Hampshire's A Safe Place, said counselors are on hand to help inform victims of their options and also develop a "safety plan" to use when things get bad.

"Each plan is done individually because each victim has different circumstances," Dunne said. "We can advise them to stay away from certain rooms during a violent episode, like the kitchen and the garage where there are weapons like knives. There are other things, like talking to a neighbor and giving them permission to call police if they hear a fight, or having a bag packed for themselves and the kids if they have to leave quickly in the middle of the night. These safety plans have saved women's lives."

Along the New Hampshire seacoast women can apply to Hampton District Court in Seabrook for a restraining order to keep their abusers away, Assistant Clerk of Court Belle Coyne said. Coyne also advises victims to call the experts for help beyond that of restraining orders.

"I've sat women down and had them call A Safe Place right from the courthouse," Coyne said. "I highly recommend the counselors there. ... And no matter how many times a woman gets a restraining order ... women can always come back to get another restraining order. You are always able to appeal to the court for help, no matter how many times you've done it before."

In Georgetown, one member of the all-women Rapid Response Team is on call "24/7," Georgetown police Chief Jim Mulligan says, and he urges victims to get that help before the emergency occurs.

Amesbury Police Department's domestic abuse officer, Det. Robert Wile, urges residents in violent situations to call the crisis center or to call him at the station.

"Just because a woman comes in and talks to me, it doesn't mean I'm going to go right out and make an arrest," Wile said. "I can listen; we can talk; it's a first step."