

Focusing on the Health Impacts of Domestic Violence

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month and October 10th was Health Cares about Domestic Violence Day. These annual events raise awareness about the essential role of health care and domestic violence/sexual assault (DV/SA) agencies in promoting survivor health and safety outcomes.

Domestic violence, also described as intimate partner violence, is a pattern of abusive behavior and coercive control that can happen in a dating, marital, or live-in intimate partner relationship, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In an abusive relationship, one partner tries to maintain control over the other by using physical, psychological, verbal, sexual violence and/or coercion. Although factors such as drug and alcohol use, stress, or a family history of abuse may contribute to the problem, domestic violence is primarily an issue of power and control. Domestic violence looks different in every relationship. It can occur among heterosexual or same-sex relationships and does not require sexual intimacy.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is associated with a range of trauma-related chronic and long-term health and mental health conditions, including depression, heart disease, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, unintended and teen pregnancies, poor pregnancy outcomes, diabetes, asthma and obesity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). The physical and mental health and social impacts of IPV also extend to children in the family who may witness violence or be in a controlling household. The more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) children face, the greater their risk for chronic diseases, alcoholism and drug use, and or dropping out of school according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Interventions for women of child-bearing age are especially critical, as homicide is the leading cause of death for pregnant and post-partum women. Even more, the U.S. still has the highest rate of domestic violence homicide of any industrialized country. Each day on average, three women are murdered by intimate partners — spouses and ex-spouses, boyfriends, partners and estranged lovers.

Domestic violence is a prevalent and pervasive issue that has an enormous health, well-being and economic impact on individuals, families, and communities. As reported in the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, in Delaware, nearly 240,000 women and men have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) during their lifetime and more than 1 in 4 (28.6%) women and 1 in 12 (8.5%) men report having experienced negative impacts from IPV (such as injury, fear, PTSD, and needing services) at some point during their lives.

Importantly, for many victims of domestic violence the first source of help will not be law enforcement, but rather their medical provider. Victims of intimate partner violence who may be too frightened to involve the police or the courts because of retribution by their abuser may seek assistance and counseling through their doctor. The healthcare provider's role as a first responder highlights the pressing need for well-trained medical staff able to identify domestic violence and respond with safety resources and supports.

Even more, patient surveys indicate that 90% don't mind being asked and 71% wished that a previous healthcare provider had asked about it. Recent research by DCADV showed that 76% of Delaware patients surveyed thought it was helpful for providers to talk to patients about relationships. In one clinic serving primarily uninsured and underserved patients, 100% of patients interviewed reported that, "it is helpful for providers to talk with patients about healthy and unhealthy relationships."

The impact of domestic/intimate partner violence on health highlights the need for an integration of community-based domestic violence services with healthcare, to address both the safety and health needs of patients experiencing domestic violence. In recognition of Domestic Violence Awareness Month last October, DCADV and the Division of Public Health (DPH) held a workshop for DPH staff and community partners to explore domestic violence as a health issue and how it impacts physical and mental health. Currently, DCADV in collaboration with Christiana Care, Westside Family Healthcare, Child Inc., and the University of Delaware's Partnership for Community Health is developing a coordinated response for victims of domestic violence to address the need for easily accessible community-based health and safety services. This collaborative effort will build upon the expertise of healthcare and domestic violence service providers to strengthen the healthcare screening efforts and create community-based response. Victims of domestic violence will be able to meet with an experienced, trauma-informed advocate in a safe location, to address health concerns, receive counseling and case management, and engage in safety-planning for themselves and their children. The project is an important step in creating healthy and safe communities in Delaware.

Throughout the state of Delaware, we have advocates, first responders, medical personnel and so many others providing supportive services, including 24-hour hotlines, shelters, transitional housing, counseling, legal services, and advocacy. If you know of someone who is experiencing domestic violence please share these 24-hour resources:

24 Hour Domestic Violence Hotlines:

- **CHILD Inc.'s Domestic Violence Program**
New Castle County
302-762-6110
- **The SAFE Program at People's Place II**
Kent & Sussex Counties
302-422-8058
- **Abriendo Puertas Bilingual Hotline**
Sussex County
302-745-9874

Domestic violence is a terrifying experience for many women and men, as well as any children who may be exposed. It is important that we bring awareness to this and give victims all the support and resources we can to help them overcome, recover and feel safe enough to move forward and live healthy, fulfilling lives.

More information on domestic violence and resources for help are available from the DPH Office of Women's Health at: <https://dhss.delaware.gov/dph/mh/owh.html>. If you are a victim of domestic violence and are looking for help, visit DCADV's website at <https://dcadv.org/domestic-violence/how-to-get-help/local-programs.html> for local resources, or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233.

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