



The Cape Cod Chronicle

Chatham [Dark Sky](#)

 **48°**
and falling
Overcast
Wind: 17 mph (SE)

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Independence House in Hyannis and locations throughout the Cape is set to install powerful Silent Witness Initiative displays in Orleans, Chatham, and Harwich in April to highlight the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence. Contributed Photo

Organization Marking 40th Year

In the state of Massachusetts almost one in three women has experienced rape, physical violence, and stalking by a partner. Nearly 50 percent of women and 25 percent of men have been the victims of non-rape sexual assault. In 2008 domestic violence was declared a public health emergency in the state. These facts, courtesy of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, are sobering. Independence House in Hyannis and on Cape Cod has been working to change that, marking its 40th anniversary this year.

The non-profit kicked off its anniversary year with an awareness campaign for teens in February and hosted several events in March honoring Women's History Month. In April the organization will begin installing displays across the area highlighting those whose lives have been impacted by domestic and sexual violence.

Part of the Silent Witness Initiative, the displays feature life-sized cutout silhouettes of men, women, and children. Traditionally, the cutouts represented women whose lives ended as the result of domestic violence. But according to Independence House Executive Director Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, the Cape-wide displays will include stories of abuse and of survival from abuse.

"The displays throughout our 40th year will be somewhat like the Clothesline Project in that they're telling a story," Hurge-Putnam said. "This year we're filling them out with a little more information and particular experiences."

The Clothesline Project originated in Hyannis in 1990 as a means of shining a light on the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence. It involves T-shirts created by survivors of or in honor of victims of domestic and sexual violence that are hung on clotheslines as part of a public display.

"The displays really are to increase awareness and get people talking more throughout the community," said Hurge-Putnam. "To get people more engaged, learning how they can become involved. It's really about bringing about cultural change, social change. To have everyone realize they can do something. They can intervene. Everyone can play a part in trying to prevent acts of aggression, sexual violence and domestic violence."

One of the earliest displays is slated to go up in Orleans on April 2 near Snow Library, with Chatham set to follow on April 26 at Kate Gould Park, and Harwich on May 10 at Brooks Park, each pending permission from the respective towns.

Hurge-Putnam said a crucial piece of the campaign is making people aware that Independence House can help.

"We always want to be completely engaged with all of the communities we serve on Cape Cod so that anyone that needs to use our resources and services is aware that we're here," she said. "We also want to take the opportunity to share our knowledge and our skills across the Cape."

Independence House provides help and resources on many levels, including a 24-hour hotline, individual and group counseling, childcare, legal assistance, medical and police advocacy, and a number of programs regarding domestic and sexual violence.

"We provide counseling for children, a teen website and chat line, we go to the hospital with someone who has been sexually assaulted and provide support and advocacy for them while they're there," Hurge-Putnam said. "It's soup to nuts, but it is specific to each individual. It's not like we have a one size fits all. For example, a person who is 65 might have a different need than a person who is 25. We work across the lifespan."

While the common misconception is that Independence House is strictly for women, it also provides assistance to men that have been the victims of domestic and sexual violence, Hurge-Putnam said.

"What's not as well known is that we do work with men that have experienced sexual assault," she said. "That's another thing we hope to get the word out about."

All of the services offered by Independence House are free.

According to the Independence House website (independencehouse.org), the organization spent 5,139 hours providing domestic violence services and 1,177 providing sexual violence services during the last fiscal year. They also spent 1,978 hours assisting with restraining and harassment orders, and served a total of 9,373 clients.

Hurge-Putnam noted that the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment helped put that issue and the issue of sexual violence in the spotlight and resulted in an uptick in calls to Independence House, as well as increased awareness.

"We know that more people are aware," Hurge-Putnam said. "I feel like people are more likely to come in for services openly these days than they were."

While there has been an overall reduction in the rates of domestic violence nationally, she noted that specific communities, such as people with disabilities, LGBTQ, minorities, and immigrants, are still fraught with incidences of domestic and sexual violence.

"Those are the communities in which we really need to be involved because those folks don't always reach out and know that there are services available," Hurge-Putnam said.

It is her hope that when people take the time to look at each of the displays, they do more than nod and keep walking.

"We hope that they are able to understand and feel some empathy for what survivors go through," she said. "To really drive home how prevalent both of these issues are. These are significant problems for one in four women and one in five men in our country."

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