

Lawyer: Help available for immigrant abuse victims

By CYNTHIA McCORMICK

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HYANNIS — Escaping abusive relationships can be especially difficult for immigrants, but help is available, Orleans lawyer Jane Romney said during a community breakfast Friday marking Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Abusers know all too well how to keep victims in line by playing the deportation card, she said during the Independence House event held at the DoubleTree by Hilton Cape Cod — Hyannis.

"It's always, 'I'm going to call immigration on you,'" she said.

If the abuser is a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, he or she also may threaten to withdraw a visa petition filed on behalf of a spouse, said Romney, an immigration attorney and herself a survivor of domestic abuse.

"It gives them more power and control. It's scary," she said. "The threat of deportation is huge."

What victims might not realize is that the federal Violence Against Women Act offers protection for immigrants who are battered spouses and their children, Romney said. Under the act, women and men affected by domestic violence can file visa petitions for themselves and their children without the abuser's knowledge.

"It can lead to a green card," Romney said.

The petitioners will need evidence of abuse, which could include police or hospital records, as well as proof of having "good moral character," which could be affidavits by people in the community, she said.

Along with the hidden packed bags and extra set of keys all victims are advised to have on hand, immigrants should have copies of their marriage licenses and passports, Romney said.

Victims of extreme abuse such as trafficking can apply for something called the "T" visa, which offers protection to victims while strengthening the ability of law enforcement to prosecute the crime, Romney said.

Getting even temporary legal status will allow the victim to get a job, "which is huge," Romney said. She also said that immigrants should put fears of deportation into perspective, saying that the government seems to be concentrating now mainly on removing illegal immigrants convicted of crimes.

"Immigration is so overloaded right now. Deportation is not a simple phone call," Romney said. "It doesn't work like that. It's a long process."

She advised immigrants to pursue the naturalization process and obtain their full rights as American citizens.

Independence House, which provides counseling and court advocacy for victims of domestic violence, sees about 70 immigrant clients a year, Executive Director Lysetta Hurge-Putnam said.

She said most of those clients are from Brazil and speak Portuguese.

The agency has two staff members who speak Portuguese and pays for the services of a "language line" that allows counselors to use an interpreter over the phone for other foreign language-speaking clients, Hurge-Putnam said.

"We wouldn't want to tell someone we couldn't help you because we don't speak the language."

Friday's breakfast — the 14th annual event sponsored by Independence House — drew about 140 people from the community, including Cape and Islands District Attorney Michael O'Keefe.

Two women spoke about their escape from domestic abuse, drawing tears and a standing ovation from the audience.

One woman said she was married to a doctor who would regularly throw the hot dinner she'd prepared in her face and make her serve him breakfast in bed the next morning.

Her husband beat and choked her and threatened to leave the country so she'd be destitute if she called authorities, the woman said. He also said no one would believe her because he was a doctor.

She said she escaped his control with the help of Independence House and supportive friends.

"I am really not alone," she said. "I have a family and they are all around me."

A Chatham woman said she had to leave the state where she used to live to get away from a husband who had turned into an abusive alcoholic.

"I was a deeply loving, faithful wife" who once enjoyed a blissful marriage, she said. Through the years, endearments turned to horrific insults, threats to kill the dog, burn down the house and, finally, a cocked gun to her head.

She said she finally realized "I'd rather live in the street and eat dirt than live like this."

The day she left in November 2012 was her "saving day," the woman said.

"Leaving my home and my life was like peeling off my skin," she said. But "I said yes to the clarity of grace that I believe was God-sent."

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