

Opinion

## Nonprofit's efforts sadly necessary

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Day in and day out, Independence House serves the women and children of this community, opening doors of hope and safety when they are needed most. The organization reaches out to women who are victims of domestic violence, providing services and safe homes where they and their children can feel secure as they decide what is next for them.

Now, Independence House is expanding its efforts to reach out to young people to help ensure that they know that an abusive relationship is never acceptable, regardless of the age of those participating in it.

Last month, the group introduced a new website directed specifically at young people in their pre-teen and teenage years. Tailored to the needs and realities of teenagers, the site includes a teenage dating bill of rights for young people in relationships, as well as a toll-free hotline that offers free round-the-clock counseling services.

Organizers say that the website is an important first step in their efforts. Recognizing that teenagers may be more likely to communicate using methods that are different from their elders, the group plans to add counseling services through an online chat room. They also hope to offer the option of texting concerns to counselors.

Although some might see this as an over-extension of Independence House's mission, the sad truth is that this effort is a vital component of the organization's goals. The group seeks to help all victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault by providing a wide range of services designed to help with the aftermath of such abuse, as well as to work toward preventing it in the future.

The Cape is far from alone in its need to address these problems. A 2011 nationwide survey by the Centers for Disease Control reported that nearly a quarter of all women and nearly 15 percent of all men who had experienced rape, physical violence or stalking by a partner had experienced their first partner-related violence between the ages of 11 and 17. A 2013 study was similarly frightening; 10 percent of the students surveyed said they had been physically victimized within the year before the survey was administered. Ten percent also reported that they had been sexually victimized during the same time period.

The CDC warns that the consequences of dating violence among teenagers include both short- and long-term damage. Teens who have experienced such violence are immediately more prone to symptoms associated with depression, anxiety and antisocial behaviors. They are also more likely than other teenagers to engage in unhealthy behaviors, including the use of alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

Similarly, dating violence can have dramatic lifelong impacts. Young people, many of whom are experiencing serious relationships for the first time, may come to believe or accept such behavior as acceptable, or even the norm. In some cases, their abusive relationships mirror those they have seen in their own homes. This can lead to self-destructive patterns of behavior, including unhealthy relationships, for many years to come.

Fortunately, Independence House has the resources and wherewithal to address these issues head on. With more than 35 years of experience, they have the background and resources to help show adults and young people alike that there is never a case where violence is an acceptable part of a relationship. Building on this foundation, the group is now sending a clear signal to teens that their relationships matter, and that they too deserve to be safe.