

In lockdown, concerns of hidden domestic violence grow

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Social restrictions limit access to help offered by courts, agencies.

“Stay home,” and “Don’t go out” have been constant refrains for the past month while the country and the state try and limit the spread of the coronavirus. While many may see that as a way to spend more quality time with loved ones, for those who suffer from domestic abuse, staying at home can feel like being trapped, with no way to reach out for help. .

With survivors stuck in close quarters with their abusers, those who deal with the problem of domestic violence expect the number of reports to increase after social restrictions are lifted.

Though the coronavirus pandemic has no recent historical comparison, organizations have seen a surge in calls related to domestic violence following quarantines caused by natural disasters, according to Toni Troop, director of communications and development with Jane Doe Inc., the Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence.

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After Hurricane Katrina, for example, there was an increase in calls, Troop said. Even after the winter holidays every year, organizations see an increase in calls.

“Honestly what we see is that people hold it together, typically,” Troop said. “They’re trying to nullify the situation and manage expectations and get through the holidays.”

When people return to work or school and step outside of the “pressure cooker,” they reach out for help to address experiences over the past few weeks, Troop said. She expects that to happen with the coronavirus pandemic, although currently the organization has been seeing varying data across municipalities.

Some police departments are reporting more domestic calls, while others are reporting fewer, she said. Troop is concerned that people are not reaching out for services because they are sheltering in place with the person causing them harm.



▲ HIDE CAPTION

Lysetta Hurge-Putnam



Cancellations related to coronavirus on Cape Cod and the Islands

Since the pandemic and the stay-at-home advisory began, the Falmouth Police Department has received more calls revolving around domestic disputes, Police Chief Edward Dunne said. In one morning alone the department received three such calls, he said.

“Some of it has to do with money,” Dunne said. “As to the real cause behind it, I don’t know, other than maybe people are just around each other more. ... People are under pressure.”

Barnstable police Lt. Mark Mellyn said most domestic incidents have actually gone down this month compared with the same months in previous years.

The number of verbal arguments in Barnstable has gone up slightly, but other categories of domestic issues such as assault and battery and restraining order violations have decreased. The number of domestic arrests are also down, Mellyn said.

“I was surprised to see that the only thing that was up were verbal arguments,” he said.

According to data provided by Jennifer Donahue, the public information officer at the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, the number of restraining orders across the state for the month of March has decreased from last year. In mid-March, the SJC ordered that in-person appearances in Massachusetts be limited to emergency matters and suspended all bench and jury trials.

“The coronavirus is probably deterring the ability to reach out for services and support,” said Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, executive director of Independence House. “The calls are down, but it has to do with the proximity of people to each other.”

Independence House, a resource and advocacy center for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, has not noticed an increased number in calls and reports since the pandemic started, but it has noticed more severe situations.

Hurge-Putnam expects to see an increase in their services once the pandemic is over, when more people will be able to reach out.

Jennifer Frazee, executive director of A Safe Place on Nantucket, said she also expects domestic violence reports to increase over the next several weeks, as individuals are still with their abusers in quarantine. A Safe Place is still operating, and all of its services are free and confidential.

“What we know is that if survivors are stuck at home with their partners that are abusive, it makes it more difficult for them to be safe,” Hurge-Putnam said. “For teens, they’re not in school where they can get away from

How to find help

Here are some resources that are available:

Independence House: 1-800-439-6507 (24/7 hotline); 800-439-6507, ext. 238 (9 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays)

Falmouth Human Services: 508-548-0533

Jane Doe Inc.: janedoe.org/find_help

It will locate the nearest organization that can help based on ZIP code.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (24-hour hotline)

SafeLink: 1-877-785-2020 (statewide domestic violence hotline)

A Safe Place on Nantucket: 508-228-2111 (24-hour hotline)

CONNECT to End Violence on Martha’s Vineyard: 508-696-7233 (24-hour hotline)

the situation or go to a friend's home like they normally would. Or after-school activities. That might have been an escape.”

She urges those who are experiencing domestic or sexual violence to privately contact them or ask someone else to do it for them. If people are able to reach out, she said, they should.

Depending on the situation, Independence House can work with people and find alternative living situations for them during the pandemic, Hurge-Putnam said.

Independence House has an extensive resource system in place with counselors who use secure, encrypted videoconferencing, and court staff is available to assist anyone who needs help with the paperwork for restraining orders or harassment orders, said Donna Giberti, development and marketing director for the agency. Its confidential and emergency domestic violence shelter is also in full operation, she said.

Other programs are transitioning to offer online services, such as online chat groups, to accommodate those seeking help.

“Survivors are figuring out where and how they can connect safely with the services that they need,” Troop said.

If people need medical care after experiencing sexual assault, they should seek that care and not forgo it, she said.

“It is a Sophie's choice that often survivors are faced with,” she said. “Do I sacrifice my personal safety around sexual and domestic violence? Or my health in terms of exposure to coronavirus? What an absolutely awful and unfair position to put someone in.”

It is important, however, to shift responsibility from the victim, who is often the one facing the biggest hurdles, Troop said.

Friends, family members, co-workers and teachers continue to be the ones to then lend a listening ear, to help think through potential strategies and can help intervene in a situation, she said.

“If you have somebody who you think is potentially causing harm to somebody,” Troop said, “we would encourage you to reach out to them and say, ‘Hey, I know this must be a hard time for you.’ ... Giving people permission to talk about that is very important.”

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