

# The Provincetown INDEPENDENT

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## When Staying at Home Is Dangerous

*With workplaces shut, friend networks are more crucial than ever*

BY K.C. MYERS APR 30, 2020

After Gabbe Rowland escaped a violent, abusive boyfriend, the police and courts got involved. The man who terrorized her is serving a six-year sentence in state prison. But the only way she got away from her abuser, Rowland said, was by going to work, where a supportive employer helped her.

“I worked for a family-owned hotel,” Rowland said. “There were times I had black eyes and he wouldn’t want me going to work. He’d make me make up an excuse.”

With most businesses now closed, escaping to work is suddenly not an option for victims of abuse.

Rowland, a Falmouth native, now advocates for those endangered by domestic violence. She and others are concerned that the stay-at-home advisory is reinforcing the toxic isolation and silence that are part of the cycle of abuse.

Many people in abusive relationships already feel like prisoners in their own homes, she said. “I can only imagine it’s hell on earth right now for someone who is physically, emotionally, or financially abused,” said Rowland.

Police on the Outer Cape report that the number of domestic violence calls they’ve received since the epidemic took hold in March is unchanged, and may even have decreased. But the New York Times reported on April 17 that law enforcement officials and social workers were alarmed by a drop in such calls.

“What I’m concerned about is it’s happening and it’s not getting reported,” the New York City police commissioner told the Times.

Shirley Smith, chair of the Outer Cape Committee on Domestic Violence, agreed.

“It’s very difficult for people to reach out,” said Smith this week, “so it’s important that if neighbors, friends, and family know about anything, please report it. It’s the children who are the silent victims.”

With schools closed, adults in abusive relationships may be afraid to leave children at home or may simply have no way to call for help with the abuser now ever-present.

The courts are processing restraining orders, which can be obtained by going to the courthouse or your police station, said Marion Broidrick, clerk magistrate at Orleans District Court. Accused perpetrators can be arraigned remotely, she said, with the judge, assistant district attorney, and defense attorney all on a videoconference call.

Calls to Independence House in Hyannis, the main domestic violence advocacy organization on Cape Cod, indicate terrible struggles inside many Cape homes.

“I think it’s doubly challenging at this time for anyone in an abusive relationship, where their options have become more constrained in finding safety and getting out of the house,” said Executive Director Lysetta Hurge-Putnam.

Independence House has a 24-hour hotline (see box) to handle emergencies and provide counseling and escape plans for desperate people. But the agency’s seven-room shelter has been full since before the pandemic, Hurge-Putnam said. It currently houses 10 people, including children.

In March, the hotline was quieter than normal, but by the middle of April the staff was taking more calls and hearing from people with more severe injuries.

“Counselors who are working from home are hearing that clients are in a lot more crises,” Hurge-Putnam said.

More marginalized people — immigrants and lower-income residents — are really in trouble, she said. “Physical, emotional, financial, and health care access,” Hurge-Putnam said, “all those resources are down.”

The best way to help someone who may be in an abusive situation is with frequent phone calls and texts. Friends and family are lifelines.

“Domestic violence happens in secrecy and isolation, but sometimes a victim will reach out because they are desperate or something transpired where they have been hurt really badly,” Hurge-Putnam said. “Then they will confide in a friend.”

She suggested having a code word to let a close friend know you’re in crisis.

“There are ways to creatively help,” she said. “And,” she added, “use the police.”

Gabbe Rowland agreed. The police, she said, are aware and well trained to handle domestic violence. Her own experience taught her there is no need to feel shame.

She was 24 years old in July 2013 when her boyfriend became violent for the first time. For a week, he beat and sexually abused her, shot her up with heroin — though she had never done drugs — and degraded her physically and emotionally.

Her employer, trying to help, threatened to fire her if she didn’t get away from him. “I always went back to him,” she said. “I didn’t have the strength to tell my parents, although they were two miles away from me.”

Somewhere deep inside she understood that his aim was to shame her into silence. But she did not let that happen. When she made it back to work after that terrible week, her boss helped her devise a plan of escape.

“If this was happening to me during a pandemic,” Rowland said, “I wouldn’t have had anyone to tell.”

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