

Advocates Fear a Hidden Rise in Violence

By Isabel Koyama

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FRANKLIN COUNTY – The number of domestic violence-related police reports in Montague has not changed dramatically since Governor Baker put a statewide stay-at-home advisory in place in late March, Montague police chief Christopher Williams told *the Reporter* yesterday.

According to department records, there have been 147 domestic violence calls since May 13, 2019, 24 of which were made in the seven weeks since the advisory took effect. Five of the 36 domestic violence-related arrests and summons in the past year, and three of the 15 incident reports filed, were made during the quarantine.

"We haven't seen a rise [in domestic violence calls], and we definitely haven't seen a decrease," says Williams of his department's data. "We've had a handful of arrests."

Nevertheless, local and national experts alike warn that domestic violence is almost certainly increasing behind closed doors, despite some decreased crime rates overall.

One April 22 article by The Marshall Project comparing data from three major US cities points out that domestic violence is difficult to assess based on police data alone, since studies show "only about half of victims of violent domestic crimes call the police when they are assaulted by a family member."

Added pandemic-related factors, including increased isolation from family and friends and unprecedented economic insecurity, might contribute to victims' underreporting, experts say.

"The eerie part of this has been that, locally and nationally, many domestic violence hotlines became very quiet," says Mary Kociela, director of the Domestic and Sexual Violence Programs for the Northwestern District Attorney's Greenfield office. "We know that it's not because the abuse has stopped, but we do think part of what is happening is that it's harder for victims to find a space and time where it's safe to call for help."

Kociela says that calls to the DA's domestic violence intervention program were unusually slow when social distancing was first implemented. But in the past couple of weeks, she has noticed calls picking up again, which she says is actually "a positive thing."

"We've been trying to get the word out to victims that even though the local community domestic violence staff is working remotely, the hotline is still available," says Kociela. "Even though the courts are closed, you can still call the courts to get a restraining order. They just created an online PDF form so victims can apply for a restraining order right from home."

Kociela adds that she hopes this remote service will continue to be available even after social distancing measures are lifted, because it saves victims the trauma of potentially having to see their offenders face to face in court.

"Domestic violence and sexual assault are prevalent anyway," concurs Andrea Ocies

Sears, program coordinator for the Women's Resource Center at the Montague Catholic Social Ministries (MCSM) in Turners Falls. "And we all acknowledge that with the stay-at-home order, there has to be an increase. It's common sense."

Sears says part of her work is to refer clients in domestic violence situations to local resources such as the New England Learning Center for Women in Transition (NELCWIT) or Safe Passage, and then follow through with them. She also reports cases of domestic violence to the Department of Children and Families.

While many of the center's direct in-person services – including a food pantry, family playgroup, and literacy group – have been temporarily put on hold, the organization continues to work with families virtually, using Skype, Facebook, and email.

"It's going to be tricky," says Sears of the coming months, "but we have a positive attitude that we will continue to serve our community, in a modified way."

Rachel Gordon, co-executive director of NELCWIT, says she has also observed a decrease in calls to their 24/7 crisis hotline during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The overall number of calls has gone down, but the severity of the situations people are calling about has gone up," laments Gordon. "We're really concerned for our clients right now. We are always concerned for them, but especially now."

NELCWIT is the primary sexual and domestic violence center for Franklin County and the North Quabbin.

Aside from their walk-in hours and supervised children's visitation program, they have been able to continue almost all of their services remotely. The organization's 24/7 crisis hotline, (413) 772-0806, has continued as is, and counselors have transitioned to conducting calls with clients online via a secure video platform.

Although these resources are still available amidst the pandemic, Gordon says that survivors in dangerous situations may have more difficulty finding the privacy and time for a video call, let alone an opportunity to leave.

"How do you find a new place to live during a pandemic?" she asks. "We do expect that whenever we get back to a more reopened world, there will be a tidal wave of people that needed support this whole time, but weren't able to get it."