



Intimate Partner Violence Persists

Efforts Made To Break Cycle

By ELIZABETH HEUBECK
Connecticut Health I-Team Writer

West Hartford resident Adrienne Doughty recalls the summer night in the family camper when her then-husband hurled an object at her that whipped past her head before shattering a window.

The sound of broken glass brought a neighbor running. That started the 62-year-old on a long path of healing from what she describes as primarily emotional abuse from her former husband whom, ironically, Doughty thought would protect her after she'd been the victim of date rape and sexual assault by a supervisor. "In those days, you couldn't say anything," she said.

Doughty found her voice at a workshop on intimate partner violence offered by Susan Omilian, an attorney who became an advocate for IPV victims after her 19-year-old niece was killed by her boyfriend.

"Susan's workshop (My Avenging Angel Workshops™) was pivotal. I wish I had found it a lot earlier," Doughty said. "You cannot recover alone."

Perhaps that message is catching on.

In the last fiscal year, 29,290 victims sought counseling from the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence's 18 member organizations, a 30 percent increase over FY 2016. But others don't seek help soon enough. In the past decade, Connecticut has averaged 13 intimate partner homicides per year, according to records from the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection.

And evidence suggests that the upcoming generation of Connecticut adults will face the threat of IPV on a similar scale: In 2015, 8 percent of high school students reported having experienced physical dating violence within the last 12 months, according to the state's Youth Behavior Risk Survey.

Experts who have battled the violent cycle of IPV throughout their profession seem confounded by its continued prevalence. "Domestic violence is a learned behavior. It's often generational; we know that," said Karen Jarmoc, CEO of the CCADV.

Despite a number of prevention initiatives and models that have been tested and found to be effective, Jarmoc acknowledges that the problem persists. "At the end of the day, it doesn't feel like it's going away or getting better," said Jarmoc, who has devoted her career to combating IPV.

But she is not without some optimism. Jarmoc says that, compared to 40 years ago, advocates and providers know much better how to identify risk factors of domestic violence and how to work with survivors to keep them safe.

"Hopefully, in another few decades, we will begin to see a cultural shift that everyone is working hard to achieve. It simply takes time," she said.

In the meantime, some promising efforts throughout the state — involving teen leaders, innovative partnerships, and technology — seek to hasten that shift.

Teen Advocates

Connecticut teenagers have played an active role in bringing awareness about the problem of IPV among high school students. Under guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the state develops the High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, offering stakeholders the opportunity to share their input on its content. In 2007, a group of forward-thinking high school students involved in Norwalk's Center for Youth Leadership took the opportunity to advocate for questions on teen dating violence to be expanded in the survey.

"They had the courage to come to the survey planning committee and say, 'We see this unhealthy behavior in our peer group,'" said Celeste Jorge, coordinator of the Connecticut high school survey. Subsequently, the following questions about teen dating violence are now included in the statewide survey: Were you ever physically forced to have sexual intercourse? Experienced physical dating violence? Experienced sexual dating violence? In the 2015 survey, the percentage of Connecticut high school students who responded in the affirmative to these questions were 7.8 percent, 8 percent, and 11.5 percent, respectively.

“I think any rate above zero at this age group is concerning,” Jorge said.

Awareness Via Mobile Apps

New and pending strategies aimed at increasing awareness and prevention of teen IPV attempt to meet this demographic where they are: on their mobile devices. The CCADV has developed a mobile app, td411, which provides interactive tools to educate teens on healthy relationships, offers a forum for users to ask questions they may be uncomfortable asking face-to-face, and gives them the opportunity to connect with a counselor for further information.

In the Yale School of Public Health’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Department, professor Trace Kershaw and doctoral student Tiara Willie are taking the technology approach to new creative heights. They’re developing a mobile app aimed at improving decision-making for mothers and daughters exposed to domestic violence. The app will display graphic novellas accessed via a video game, through which users choose a character they relate to, and subsequently pick behaviors that result in either positive or negative consequences.

“Female adolescents affected by violence in their homes are vulnerable to unwittingly accepting a negative cycle that can have widespread influence on the health and well-being of women across generations,” Kershaw said.

This story was reported under a partnership with the Connecticut Health I-Team (c-hit.org).



For more information about Susan Omilian and her My Avenging Angel Workshops™, visit www.ThriverZone.com.

Her books about her work with women who have been abused, helping them take the journey from victim to survivor to thriver are also available on her website.