

State, local officials raise awareness of domestic violence

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EDMOND No parts of Oklahoma, including Edmond, are immune to the devastating effects of domestic violence.

In August, a 48-year-old Shawnee woman died from a gunshot wound to the head. Police arrested her husband of less than six months.

In July, a 73-year-old Afton-area man and his 66-year-old wife were found dead. They reportedly were experiencing marital difficulties.

More than 23,400 domestic violence cases were reported to law enforcement officials last year, an increase of 9.2 percent over 1998 totals, Attorney General Drew Edmondson's office reports.

The 2007 cases included 56 domestic violence homicides. Oklahoma ranks No. 4 among states in the rate of women murdered by men, according to a new study by the Violence Policy Center.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month in Oklahoma, and state officials are using this time to spread the word about domestic violence and what is being done to prevent it.

Marcia Smith, Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault executive director, said domestic violence is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through the use of fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence.

Under the OCADVSAs definition, domestic violence may include emotional abuse, economic abuse, sexual abuse, using children, threats, using male privilege, intimidation, isolation and a variety of other behaviors used to maintain fear, intimidation, power and control.

Smith said the state has taken positive steps toward reducing domestic violence, but the No. 4 ranking and the recent murder cases mean not enough people are getting the message.

We need to get busier, Smith said.

Edmondson said awareness is improving in the Legislature and with the general public. But the state's work is not done.

Statistics on the number of women who end up dead are still dismal and unacceptable, Edmondson said.

In response to these and other alarming statistics, efforts to reduce the occurrence of domestic violence have come from Gov. Brad Henry, Edmondson and the Legislature.

State Sen. Debbie Leftwich authored a new law that uses global positioning system technology to better protect domestic abuse victims. Court-issued GPS devices will automatically notify both the victim and police if an offender violates geographic boundaries set by the court.

In November 2007, Edmondson's office and Wal-Mart launched a campaign designed to help abuse victims secretly locate shelters and domestic violence service programs in their area.

Wal-Mart has placed informational posters in the female-only areas of its stores, chiefly in womens dressing rooms and bathrooms, so victims can access the information out of sight of the abuser.

A 24-hour hotline, the Oklahoma Safeline, serves as a statewide referral source for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Calls to 1-800-522-SAFE (7233) are answered by crisis intervention specialists who can provide information about law enforcement and safety options and refer the caller to local resources.

Smith said victims of domestic abuse must tell someone in order to get help.

We can only help you if you tell us, but we cant help you if you dont tell us, Smith said.

Smith encouraged victims to call for help, and the assistance only is offered, not ordered.

Glynda Chu, spokeswoman for the Edmond Police Department, said the department encourages all victims of domestic violence to report crimes.

Many times, victims are hesitant to come forward, but we want them to know there is help available, and they dont have to live in fear and continue to be victims in their own homes, Chu said.

Chu said victims need to call 9-1-1 as soon as possible. Officers can refer them to a safe house where they can go and also take their children and get help with safe shelter and counseling, she said. The locations are not made public because the victim needs to be in a safe environment.

The officer also will ensure that victims receive adequate medical attention, Chu said.

Other helpful services provided by the Attorney Generals Office include the Oklahoma VINE criminal tracking and victim notification system, an address confidentiality program and court-appointed special advocates.

More information about these services is available by calling the AGs victim services unit at 521-3921 or on the Web at www.oag.state.ok.us .