

Domestic violence incidence reports rise as community struggles to meet victims' needs

By Elizabeth Van Brocklin

In the heat of summer in 1993, Bessie Elmore stood at a pay phone in downtown Durham, wondering who to call for help. Three weeks earlier, she'd stepped off a bus from Stone Mountain, Ga., where she'd left a house full of fine crystal, family photographs and a husband who had abused her for more than 25 years.

She stayed in the marriage out of concern for her children, financial security, pride—and because there was no one to whom she could turn. That July day in Durham, scared and broke, Bessie saw a sign about a domestic violence shelter nearby. She dropped her last quarter and dialed.

The phone call led her to the Orange–Durham Battered Women's Coalition, which would later merge with Rape Crisis of Durham to form the Durham Crisis Response Center (DCRC) in 2001. "They saved my life," says Elmore of the advocates who helped her confront the fact that she was a victim of domestic abuse.

Overall crime rates in Durham are down—the lowest in 23 years—according to the 2012 Annual Police Crime Report released last week, but statistics indicate domestic violence remains prevalent.

Last year, the Durham Police Department's Domestic Violence Unit handled 2,128 reported incidences—more than half involving repeat offenders. Yearly case totals show a moderate increase trend of domestic violence calls since the unit's creation in 1997.

The number of reported cases does not equal the number of incidences, says Judy Chaet, operations director for the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "Certainly the economic downturn has increased the number of reports. In terms of the number of incidences, we're always at a disadvantage because women don't report."

Chaet says only one in five abuse victims actually seeks help.

DCRC answers an average of 250 calls per month. Between 1,500 and 2,000 victims of domestic violence and sexual assault seek out the center's services each year, says Aurelia Sands Belle, its executive director.

Deanna Manley, the DCRC's crisis line coordinator, says there were 406 calls in July 2012, the highest number she has seen in her seven years at the agency.

And it's not just here. "Durham is a snapshot of what's going on throughout the United States," Manley says. "Sexual violence and domestic violence are everywhere, and we as a society need to wake up."

"The numbers have always been there," says Alma Davis, director of shelter services for DCRC. "Now it's more reported. People are seeing us and other agencies as a resource."

For example, Davis says, more Latino women are seeking DCRC's services because of concerted outreach efforts within that community. She's seen a similar trend among older women who are finally coming forward after years of enduring physical, psychological or sexual abuse. While men make up the minority of cases, they face abuse too, and are slowly overcoming stigma and shame to share their experiences.

But Durham faces a shortage of services to respond to the increasingly expressed need. DCRC is the only support agency for victims of domestic violence and sexual violence in Durham County. Their emergency shelter has 17 beds; Davis says they need twice that.

Chaet agrees: "That's not very much considering the size of the county," she says.

By comparison, the InterAct domestic violence shelter in Raleigh can accommodate 45; Safe Alliance in Charlotte has room for 80. While other local shelters such as Genesis Home and Durham Rescue Mission have increased capacity in recent years, the DCRC has not.

"As far as the shelter is concerned, it's the same as it was 20 years ago," says Elmore, who has worked as a night counselor at DCRC since she first sought help there in 1993. "There are always people on the waiting list." In 2012, more than 230 women and children took refuge at the shelter, but 100 others were turned away—not including the children accompanying their mothers.

When the shelter is full, abuse victims tread precariously close to homelessness. Carolyn Schuldt, executive director of Open Table Ministries, works closely with the city's homeless and knows of several women who left an abusive situation only to end up hiding in the woods or living on the streets.

This year, Durham's annual homeless count showed an alarming increase in the number of homeless who have also experienced domestic violence, jumping from 57 to 100 cases. "These are strong numbers," says Belle. "This points out how bad the problem is in Durham County."

Until last year, DCRC offered transitional housing for eight families for up to 24 months, but the complex had to be shut down when the center lost federal funding in 2012.

Despite its 36-year history, DCRC continues to struggle for stable funding. "The DCRC does a tremendous job for what they have. They know what they're doing," says Durham Police Sgt. Joseph Piatt of the Domestic Violence Unit. The center offers a range of free community services, including the 24-hour confidential crisis help line, support groups, legal advocacy, hospital accompaniment, job training and child care.

Victims tend to pinball between emergency and transitional shelters. They often return to abusive partners, so increasing the number of permanent housing options is needed.

Children who witness violence at home often carry harmful attitudes and behaviors to school and into future relationships. Programs that support and counsel kids can help break the cycles of violence.

Though DCRC is the only agency of its kind in town, no single organization can mend this problem on its own. Domestic violence is closely linked to issues of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and mental illness, and requires a collaborative community response.

It also calls for courageous individuals to pick up the phone—like Bessie Elmore did on that summer day in 1993.

This article appeared in print with the headline "Durham's domestic violence dilemma."

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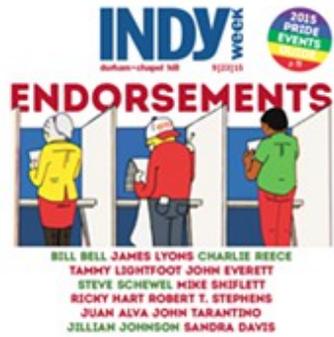
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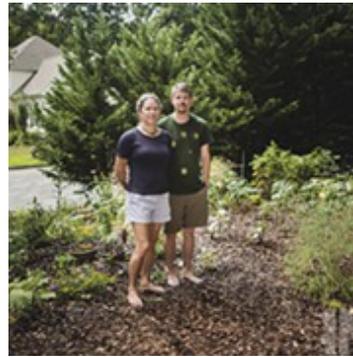
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