

GUEST COLUMNIST - KIERSTEN WARNING

Special challenges for victims

In communities of privilege or affluence, victims of domestic violence face special challenges - ones which those in less privileged communities may not. Some of the very characteristics we value in our community may act as obstacles when it comes to seeking or being offered help when there is violence in the home. These represent substantial challenges that impact victims' ability to leave their abusers.

Reflection upon the dynamics of a privileged community (in income, social/professional status or education) shows the impact this privilege has upon silencing victims. It reveals a list of characteristics that are helpful in explaining the unique challenges of addressing domestic violence in a privileged community.

In one privileged community in MetroWest Boston with a population of 19,000, one in three crimes against people reported to the police involve domestic violence. The police responded to four calls involving elder abuse, eight calls involving child abuse, and 134 calls involving domestic violence. Domestic violence comprised 7.5 percent of all department calls.

An additional 60 calls were received from residents by the Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Program (DVVAP). Comments by community members indicate that possibly this represents only 50 percent of this community's victims.

The following are some characteristics of privileged communities

Isolation - Because some parts of a Massachusetts privileged community resemble rural communities with large tracts of land and few neighbors, there is no one nearby who can hear the abuse. This physical isolation can be a critical factor in more safety planning, as there may be no one in sight or hearing to respond to a call for help.

Despite close proximity to one another in the more traditional subdivisions, neighbors are often strangers and each family is absorbed in its own activities. This social isolation prevents neighbors from developing relationships promoting intervention with a family experiencing domestic violence, even if just to contact the police during an abusive incident.

Several initiatives may be under way to address this situation. Formal community networks are working in general to promote our greater sense of community. Community-centered health, service and faith programs are training themselves to address domestic violence with their neighbors and friends. And lastly, many communities have begun domestic violence roundtables which can be open to any interested community member; some have monthly educational meetings and some develop outreach and awareness projects.

High level of education - Victims who call upon the services of the police and other providers in privileged communities are often professors, lawyers and doctors. Victims ask for information about divorce, custody, property, real estate and even banking laws that would allow them to create comprehensive escape plans. The need for a complete network of sensitive real estate agents, powerful divorce attorneys, and banking executives becomes integral in safety planning with these victims. Advocates and community activists need to be trained well beyond the traditional domestic

violence curriculum, as referral systems in privileged communities often extend far beyond therapeutic support groups.

If the victim has a high level of education, this often increases the shame and self-blame people feel about being in a battering situation. There is also a mistaken belief, even among some helping professionals, that domestic violence does not occur among well-educated people, making it difficult for victims to be readily believed.

Elevated social status is one of the greatest barriers preventing victims from seeking help. Victims and abusers in affluent communities are the judges, doctors, lawyers and town officials who are held in high social esteem by others. A victim must have great courage to identify to herself that she is in an abusive relationship. She must also accept that her neighbors and friends may not be willing to admit that domestic violence affects their community, let alone anyone they know.

Elevated income acts as another great barrier in calling for help. Oftentimes victims are driving Mercedes SUVs without access to any money and are expected to put on a happy face while living under violent and hostage-like situations. The myth often found in traditional domestic violence communities is that victims of privilege have the financial means to access private services to address the violence. The fact is that victims often do not have access to cash, credit cards, checkbooks or even information about the amount and location of family finances.

Little support from family members - Family members tend to minimize the abuse because of the elevated income and social status of many victims in privileged communities. "What are you going to do? Leave your big house and live on the streets with your kids who have only known the best of the best? Are you crazy? You should stay for the kids. How bad can it be?"

System-phobia - Most residents in affluent communities are unfamiliar and uncomfortable asking for help from traditional social service agencies such as a domestic violence hotline and the Department of Social Services. They may feel their pride insulted to make such contacts, and the agencies themselves may suffer from stereotypes about helping victims from privileged communities.

To address this, advocates and community activists can work with traditional service providers to advocate for victims from privileged communities. Reassure victims that traditional service agencies are available to assist them, outlining the different ones available and the protocol for each.

Social workers are often correct in assuming that children of troubled families are under the care of therapists and psychiatrists, which may lead them to believe the issues in the family are adequately addressed. Oftentimes, children's behavior is often managed without confronting or working with the parents to explore the root causes of the behavior. Little or no attention may be paid to the parents in these families.

Systems warfare is one of the most common tools of privileged abusers. Victims recount horror stories of bankruptcy from defending against their partners' abuse of the legal and social service system. Abusers' threats that their victims will never have anything if they leave are very, very real in privileged communities.

Victims' cost-benefit analyses of leaving their abusers are daunting as many face the real possibility of poverty with no tools for nor knowledge of how to live in poverty. This factor alone contributes greatly to the number of silent victims that will never call for help.

Bizarre abuse - According to victims and to batterer intervention programs, bizarre acts of abuse are also characteristic in privileged communities. The higher the education and social status the more commonplace the bizarre forms of abuse. This bizarreness also becomes a barrier to victims asking for help as it can be particularly shameful to admit and the risk of disbelief is high.

Privileged communities have made good progress in identifying and meeting the special needs of their domestic violence victims. With community support and involvement, we can meet our goal to continue adapting to the needs of our residents.

The Domestic Violence Victim Assistance Program (DVVAP) was formed in October 1998 by the Concord Police Department and the Network for Women's Lives. Current collaborators include the Acton, Bedford, Carlisle, Concord, Lincoln, Maynard and Stow police departments and Domestic Violence Services of Central Middlesex Inc.

DVVAP is funded in part by the Concord-Carlisle Community Chest, the Acton-Boxborough United Way and Women's Independence Network. You can reach DVVAP at P.O. Box 1556, Concord MA 01742, call 978-318-3421, or e-mail "DVVAP@ConcordNet.Org"

DVVAP's toll-free warmline is 888-991-4639.

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