

## **Increased Financial Stress Affects Domestic Violence Victims**

National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) data released today suggests a link between financial stress and domestic violence. For victims who called the national Hotline during the six week study, 54 percent reported a change in their household's financial situation in the past year.

NDVH CEO Sheryl Cates said the study was developed in response to both an increase in anecdotal information from callers about how the economic downturn has affected their family, and questions from news media all over the country who asked whether the increase in the demand for Hotline, residential and non-residential services was related to the economy.

"Hotline calls in the third quarter of 2008 were up significantly over 2007, with September up 21 percent," Cates said. "From what we were hearing on the calls, we believed that there was a link, but needed data to be sure."

From November 12 until December 31, 2008, 32,316 Hotline calls were received, with 7,868 callers participating in the study. Of those, 54 percent (3,272) answered yes to the question "Has there been a change in your household's financial situation in the past year?"

Sixty-four percent also answered the second question affirmatively, which was "Do you believe the abusive behavior has increased in the past year?"

"This increase in call volume comes at a time when private donations to the Hotline have decreased significantly," said Cates. "About 35 percent of our budget is private funds from corporations, foundations and individuals. Given our current capacity and the current call volume, we project as many as 44,000 Hotline calls could go unanswered if we do not reach our funding goals."

### **Victims of Abuse**

#### **Domestic Violence: Healing the Wounds**

Millions of people are in abusive relationships, or directly affected by one. After living in an abusive relationship, problems don't end when victims escape the nightmare. The abuser's psychological and physical attacks leave deep wounds that are difficult to heal unless carefully attended to in the aftermath of such trauma.

There is hope for survivors of domestic violence. Although difficult and painful, recovery from abuse is possible. The healing process starts with recognizing how domestic violence impacts its survivors.

#### **The impact of abuse on survivors**

Survivors of domestic violence recount stories of put-downs, public humiliation, name-calling, mind games and manipulations by the abuser. Psychological scars left by

emotional and verbal abuse are often more difficult to recover from than physical injuries. They often have lasting effects even after the relationship has ended. The survivor's self-esteem is trampled in the course of being told repeatedly that she is worthless, stupid, untrustworthy, ugly or despised.

It is common for an abuser to be extremely jealous and controlling, and insist that the victim not see friends or family members. The victim may be forbidden to work or leave the house without the abuser. If the victim is employed, she often loses her job due to the chaos created by such relationships.

This isolation increases the abuser's control over the victim and results in the victim losing any emotional, social or financial support from the outside world. This increases the victim's dependence upon the abuser, making it more difficult to leave the relationship. If she does leave, she often finds herself totally alone and unable to support herself and her children.

#### A traumatic experience

Domestic violence is a traumatic experience for its victims. Traumatic experiences produce emotional shock and other psychological problems. The American Psychiatric Association has identified a specific type of mental distress common to survivors of trauma called posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Common reactions to trauma include:

- Fear and anxiety — While normal responses to dangerous situations, fear and anxiety can become a permanent emotional state without professional help. Memories of the trauma can trigger intense anxiety and immobilize the survivor. Children may express their fears by becoming hyperactive, aggressive, develop phobias or revert to infantile behavior.
- Nightmares and flashbacks — Because the trauma is so shocking and different from normal everyday experiences, the mind cannot rid itself of unwanted and intrusive thoughts and images. Nightmares are especially common in children.
- Being in "danger mode" — Jitteriness, being easily startled or distracted, concentration problems, impatience and irritability are all common to being in a "heightened state of alert" and are part of one's survival instinct. Children's reactions tend to be expressed physically because they are less able to verbalize their feelings.
- Guilt, shame and blame — Survivors often blame themselves for allowing the abuse to occur and continue for as long as it did. Survivors feel guilty for allowing their children to be victimized. Sometimes others blame the survivors for allowing themselves to be victims. These emotions increase the survivor's negative self-image and distrustful view of the world.
- Grief and depression — Feelings of loss, sadness and hopelessness are signs of depression. Crying spells, social withdrawal and suicidal thoughts are common when grieving over the loss and disappointment of a disastrous relationship.

## Recovery

To recover from domestic violence, the survivor must:

- Stop blaming herself for what has happened — take responsibility for present and future choices.
- Stop isolating herself — reconnect with people in order to build a support network.
- Stop denying and minimizing feelings — she should learn how to understand and express herself with the help of a therapist.
- Stop identifying herself as a victim— take control of her life by joining a survivors' support group.
- Stop the cycle of abuse — get herself and her children counseling to help heal psychological wounds and to learn healthy ways to function in the world.

Recovery from domestic violence is a step-by-step process; a journey no one should take alone. The first step toward becoming a survivor is taken when victims call for help. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is (800) 799-SAFE.