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Family violence Web site links victims to services

By Patricia Donovan

Family violence occurs in many more homes than most of us realize. Forty-two percent of women murdered every year are killed by members of their households. Victims also include children, the disabled, the elderly and even men — people you know and may even know well, according to attorney Suzanne E. Tomkins, director of the Family Violence Law Clinic in the University at Buffalo Law School.

As brutal as family violence often is, Tomkins says domestic abuse is a "private crime" — a "secret" kept by the families who will usually expend a lot of effort to keep it private.

Experts tell us that victims are locked into destructive environments for many reasons. It may be because they are emotionally and physically traumatized, don't know where to get help, are ashamed or fear public scrutiny, economic disaster or retribution if the perpetrator learns of their plans.

Tomkins, associate clinical professor in the UB Law School, wanted to offer safe passage to those trying to escape violent homes and to those who aren't ready to leave but want to minimize the effect of violence in their lives. So she created a Web site called Response to Violence at http://violence-response.net that aids victims directly and helps service providers in Western New York coordinate services and communicate more effectively with one another.

A public service of the University at Buffalo, the Web site is part of the Western New York Regional Information Network (WNYRIN), a directory of public service agencies, information on governance, and links to regional data that is a program of UB's Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth. The Response to Violence site was designed by Olivia Arditi, operations director of WNYRIN. It can be accessed at http://rin.buffalo.edu/.

The purpose of the site is to assist users to obtain all kinds of help in absolute privacy. It even gives them specific instructions so they can reduce the chance that the perpetrator can trace their "travels" over the Internet. The site provides information about 24-hour hotlines, emergency medical services, emergency shelters, support groups, counseling services, legal services and advocacy groups sponsored by dozens of service agencies, churches, hospitals and police departments in the eight counties of Western New York.

The site also maintains a community calendar listing workshops and conferences on domestic violence. It links to more than 30 agencies running prevention programs and can assist individuals who want to volunteer their services to one of the many groups that offer services to children, teens, the elderly and families in crisis.

Much of the funding for the Web site was secured by State Senator Mary Lou Rath. Arditi says the site was developed in an effort to facilitate communication among agencies, increase the visibility of their work to victims of domestic violence and provide for these persons a one-stop site for information, support and assistance.

Tomkins adds that because family violence has an impact on many areas of life, recovery may involve different kinds of help — job training, counseling for children, family therapy, legal advice, financial or housing assistance, to name a few. She said the team now is developing a search engine that will allow users to search by county, service required, age and sex of the victim and other criteria so they can gain access to the information and services needed more quickly and easily. They also are making presentations to agencies to make them familiar with the Web site so they use it efficiently.

"I think that heightened awareness of this problem has led to tremendous changes over the last 20 years, and especially in the last 10 years, that benefit victims of domestic violence," says Tomkins. "State and federal laws have been rewritten, and today we see much more interdisciplinary organizing. Police departments now work with domestic-violence advocates, and service providers cooperate to help people get the many services they need in these situations."

The problem remains a very serious one, however. A 1997 report of the surgeon general pointed out that the debilitating results of domestic violence can be seen in de-
creased productivity, increased medical costs, increasing loads on the courts and criminal justice system, the need for more police work and lost work hours. The long-term impacts on children who witness domestic violence include school failures, societal violence, criminality and the cost of prisons, and homelessness.

Domestic violence costs American businesses an estimated $5 billion a year in absenteeism, lost productivity, stress, health care costs, turnover and workplace violence.

"The problem is huge," Tomkins says, "and if they're going to provide adequate assistance and referral, then hundreds of police departments, courts, attorneys, social workers, therapists, agencies, medical personnel, counselors and clergy need up-to-date information about what help is available, where it can be found, how much it costs, and so on."

The UB Law School Family Violence Law Clinic has worked on this problem with agencies throughout the region for the last decade and has developed resource guides for several WNY counties. Tomkins says that when she learned about WNYVIN, she realized that immediate access to information and services related to domestic violence could be offered to a much larger audience.

"Public education is a very important tool in attacking the problem," she says, "and the Response to Violence Web site is an excellent opportunity to inform families directly and help professionals learn more about one another by communicating and sharing information about events, training and educational opportunities of concern to all of us."

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