



Delaware crime: Grant helps disabled abuse victims



Written by

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Delaware has a 24-hour hot line that is the first point of contact for many victims of domestic abuse.

But for people with special health problems, help can be more than a phone call away.

Crisis counselors may not have specialized training to help a person with a physical disability such as cerebral palsy, an intellectual disability such as Down syndrome or a mental illness such as schizophrenia.

Because of the victim's problems, their abuse also may not be taken seriously.

"If somebody calls the hot line on the phone and they're terribly upset and they can't articulate well, it could be a manifestation of their disability," said Beth Mineo, the director of the University of Delaware

Center for Disabilities Studies.

To create a better environment -- the kind in which a person with a disability or mental illness can easily get help if he or she is abused by his or her husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend -- advocates of abuse victims and the disabled have started working together.

The U.S. Department of Justice recently awarded a three-year \$527,081 grant to strengthen services and resources for disabled victims of domestic violence.

The money is going to three organizations: the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Delaware and the Center for Disabilities Studies.

Few studies exist on the rate of domestic abuse among the disabled.

For people without disabilities, there is a rate of 20 violent crimes for every 1,000 people 12 and older, according to a Justice

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Department report published in December. For people with disabilities, there is a rate of 40 violent crimes for every 1,000 people 12 and older.

While domestic-violence advocates know a lot about abuse, they don't have a strong understanding about the needs of people with disabilities and people with mental illnesses, Mineo said. Likewise, advocates of the disabled aren't experts on domestic violence.

The local organizations don't have specific plans on what will come out of their grant.

"Historically, we have not done a good job of having services available for people in that community," said Carol Post, executive director of the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "Now we're building a program to help them."

The final product could include printed documents about domestic violence that are written in simple words or explained through pictures that people with disabilities can easily comprehend.

Another thing that could develop is a workshop focusing on domestic violence in the disabled population, Post said.

The workshop could be used to train crisis counselors who are better equipped to help a person with, for example, cerebral palsy. The counselor could be trained to speak slowly and take time to listen.

"We want to spend the first 12 to 18

months just making sure we all understand one another's worlds," Mineo said. "Because we are trying to address so many complex concerns, it makes sense that we are in each other's worlds."

For people with mental illness, the abuse doesn't always take the form of a verbal threat or a black eye.

The abuser can instead withhold a victim's medication, said Ken Singleton, executive director of NAMI Delaware.

"We see far too many people who aren't even aware that they've been involved in a domestic-violence situation," he said.

FOR HELP

Delaware's 24-hour Domestic Violence hot line
New Castle County (bilingual)
762-6110
Kent and Sussex counties
422-8058
Kent and Sussex counties (bilingual)
745-9874

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