

Attorneys help victims of violence

Legal assistance can be a lifeline for domestic abuse

Almost 20 people throughout the United States are physically abused by a partner each minute of the day.

More than 30 percent of women and 25 percent of men have been victims of violence by an intimate partner.

Of all violent crimes committed in the United States, 15 percent are domestic violence cases.

These statistics, compiled by the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#), highlight the reality that clients of Community Legal Aid face each day.

But as the non-profit law firm joins hundreds of organizations across the country this month to recognize Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Executive Director Steven McGarrity is hoping people don't stop at the statistics.

"The statistics should really be the starting point of the conversation," he shared. "But we're hoping people will look beyond the numbers to the real, human impact of domestic violence – the stories of those who have lived it."

One such story is of a 40-year-old woman who needed protection from her ex-boyfriend, who broke into her house one evening. He attacked her, duct taped her mouth, zip tied her hands, and beat her with a bat. He then dragged her into the kitchen and doused her with lighter fluid. He was attempting to light her on fire using the gas line from the stove when the cops arrived and saved her. She then worked with a Legal Aid attorney to get a protection order against him, while the county prosecutor followed up with criminal charges.

"Our hope," McGarrity explained, "is that by putting real faces to these statistics, we can have meaningful discussions with community organizations and the general public on how best to address and ultimately prevent these situations from happening."

The situations McGarrity referenced can be wide ranging.

"We represent survivors of domestic violence in a large range of civil cases," said Jeanne Charles, managing attorney for Legal Aid's family law team. "For imminent safety needs, we provide assistance in civil protection orders, sexual assault protection orders, and stalking protection orders. We also handle other civil matters, like divorce and custody, for survivors of domestic violence, as well."

Legal Aid's advocates took on 877 domestic violence cases last year, and in just the first half of this year, secured 91 protection orders for clients.

"So often, in these abuse scenarios, people don't think to call a lawyer," McGarrity said. "They think of getting physical medical treatment, going to a shelter, seeking mental health counseling. And of course, of all of those things should be done. But once they are out of immediate danger, following up with an attorney to learn your rights is a crucial step. And that's where we can help."

Legal Aid works in partnership with domestic violence shelters and other community partners in the eight counties it serves.

“Our partnerships are some of the most important resources we have for our clients,” Charles explained. “We reciprocate referrals with one another so that our clients can take advantage of resources in the community and get the help they need.”

How to get help

If you or someone you know is suffering from domestic violence, stalking, or sexual assault, contact Legal Aid to see if you qualify for assistance.

If you are in immediate danger, find your local domestic violence shelter by visiting www.odvn.org/survivor/shelter.html

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