At A Glance: Priority Health Outcomes

Domestic Violence

The 2025-2028 Delaware State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) utilized insights from the 2022-2023 Delaware State Health Assessment (SHA) to identify five key health priorities based on health disparities throughout the state. The five priorities include chronic disease, mental health, maternal health, premature death, and avoidable injury. Domestic violence intersects with each of these areas, making it a critical public health issue that requires both prevention and intervention strategies. The SHIP breaks down the avoidable injury priority into goals surrounding enhancing community safety, improving transportation, and promoting awareness of safety initiatives and resources. Domestic violence prevention falls into this category of avoidable injury. This edition of the *At A Glance* series aims to promote awareness of domestic violence prevention initiatives in Delaware, following a conversation with Joe Myers, the Prevention Director at the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence (DCADV).

Domestic violence in Delaware mirrors national patterns but is shaped by the state's local conditions, resource availability, and geographic diversity (World Population Review, 2023). Although strong networks of advocates and service providers support survivors, the need for safe housing, long-term stability, and comprehensive prevention efforts in Delaware continues to grow. Shelters often operate at or near capacity, highlighting the demand for transitional and affordable housing (Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy [OWAA], 2021). Broader vital condition factors, such as limited transportation, systemic inequities, and affordable housing shortages, increase vulnerability, particularly for marginalized communities (OWAA, 2021).

Delaware's domestic violence prevention efforts are guided by the DELTA AHEAD framework, which identifies risk and protective factors at multiple levels of the social-ecological model. Individual factors such as aggressive behavior, limited conflict-resolution skills, and exposure to violence increase the likelihood of experiencing domestic violence (CDC, 2024). Community-level issues, including poverty, unemployment, and under-resourced neighborhoods, further heighten the likelihood of domestic violence (OWAA, 2021). Systemic issues, such as

income inequality and inadequate policy support, also contribute to environments where violence can persist. In contrast, strong social networks, community connectedness, and access to education and stable employment serve as protective factors (Chou, 2021). Delaware's prevention strategies emphasize these strengths, promoting healthy relationships, youth engagement, and positive social environments.

Despite the availability of services across the state, Myers detailed how many survivors encounter substantial barriers when seeking help. Awareness remains a major challenge: some residents do not know where to find domestic violence resources or how to access them (Chou, 2021). Financial abuse, common but often misunderstood, can be especially difficult to recognize when financial literacy is limited. Transportation is another significant barrier, particularly in Kent and Sussex counties, where service locations may be far from survivors seeking safety. Even with 24/7 hotline access, the inability to travel safely or quickly can prevent individuals from reaching a shelter (Kelley, 2023). Survivors also frequently face "system fatigue," becoming discouraged after navigating repeated obstacles in social services, healthcare, and the legal system (Berke, 2023). These challenges underscore the need for more coordinated, trauma-informed, and accessible pathways to support.

At the same time, Delaware benefits from a strong, collaborative network of organizations dedicated to addressing domestic violence. Myers highlights how providers communicate closely and respond quickly when survivors need help, often collaborating to resolve urgent housing or safety concerns. The Domestic Violence Community Health Worker Program is a particularly effective model, as it brings support directly into communities and connects survivors with services rapidly, often within an hour. Myers speaks to how prevention efforts focus on building healthy relationship skills among youth, often integrated into community programming that strengthens communication and support networks without explicitly labeling the work as "violence prevention." Partnerships with schools, community centers, and resource hubs create wraparound environments that foster long-term well-being.

Myers consistently highlights that Delaware's greatest strength lies in its committed workforce and interconnected service system. Continued investment in prevention, improved access to

trauma-informed services, and efforts to address economic and systemic inequities will be essential to reducing domestic violence statewide. By strengthening protective factors, expanding housing and transportation supports, and maintaining strong cross-sector collaboration, Delaware can continue making progress toward improving safety and supporting survivors across all communities.

References

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Delaware SHIP Stakeholder Interview with Dr. Alexandra Wynn, Elena Lynn, and Joe Myers, Prevention Director, Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Q: What is your position, and how long have you worked there?

Joe Myers: Fantastic. My name is Joe Myers, I use he/him pronouns, and I am the Prevention Director at the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence. I started in June 2023, so I've been in this role for about two years. Prior to that, I worked in prevention at a victim service center in Pennsylvania for about nine and a half years.

Q: What's your overall impression of the current state of domestic violence in Delaware?

Joe Myers: Delaware is a unique space, but it's pretty similar to what's going on nationwide. We have a lot of great work being done to address and prevent domestic violence, but there's still a significant amount of need. Shelters often reach capacity, so there's a high demand for transitional and long-term stable housing for survivors and their families. Prevention work is also happening, but funding is limited. That's always been my focus—prevention—and there just isn't quite enough funding coming into the state to support all the activities that could be happening. Overall, there are a lot of awesome people doing great work, and survivors are having many of their needs met. But those needs continue to increase because of intersecting issues like the pandemic and other systemic challenges.

Q: Could you talk a little more about some of those intersecting issues?

Joe Myers: Sure. When we talk about the social and structural determinants of health, things like the lack of affordable housing, limited access to quality education, and transportation all increase the risk of domestic violence. These issues connect back to longstanding systems of oppression. For example, members of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly trans folks, are at heightened risk because they may not have the same systemic support that cisgender individuals do when seeking services.

Q: Could you talk about the protective and risk factors for domestic violence?

Joe Myers: Absolutely. Delaware has a long history of CDC collaboration and holds the DELTA AHEAD grant, short for "Domestic Violence Prevention through Leadership and Alliances, Addressing Health Equity and Disparities." We use that framework to implement and evaluate different IPV (intimate partner violence) prevention interventions. Risk and protective factors exist across the social-ecological model. At the individual level, we focus on addressing aggressive behaviors, anger, and hostility among youth while promoting healthy relationship skills and nonviolent problem-solving. At the community level, we work to strengthen under-resourced neighborhoods, addressing poverty, unemployment, and community violence, which all increase the risk of IPV. Societally, we tackle issues like income inequality and weak

health or education policies. We also advocate for legislative action and workplace policies that increase safety and protection for workers. Protective factors include strong social networks, supportive communities, and accessible resources. When people feel connected, they have others who hold them accountable and help guide them toward positive, pro-social behaviors.

Q: What are some of the barriers Delaware residents face when seeking help for domestic violence?

Joe Myers: Some barriers are simply about awareness, knowing where resources are and how to access them. Delaware is fortunate in that providers know one another well, but getting information into communities is still a challenge. Another barrier is recognizing abuse. For instance, we've done a lot of awareness around financial abuse, but financial literacy gaps make many people vulnerable to manipulation. Transportation is another issue, especially in southern Delaware, where shelters are few and far apart. Without transportation, it doesn't matter if a hotline is available 24/7; survivors may still be trapped. Finally, there's "system fatigue." Survivors who have faced obstacles with hospitals, social services, or other agencies may feel discouraged if they encounter more barriers when seeking domestic violence support.

Q: What are some of the strengths of Delaware's system for helping residents who experience domestic violence?

Joe Myers: Our service provider community is very strong. Advocates, whether police-based or community-based, tend to know each other well. That small-state connection allows us to respond quickly and creatively. One major strength is our DV Community Health Worker Program, where staff meet directly with survivors in the community. I once had someone walk into our office seeking help, and within 45 minutes, a community health worker was there to assist. That kind of quick, compassionate response is incredible. The passion in this field is a huge strength. Everyone shares the goal of ending violence and supporting survivors. On the prevention side, we focus on connection, teaching healthy relationship skills and pro-social behaviors without even having to mention "violence." My job is often to find and collaborate with others already doing preventive work, even if they don't see it that way. Building community safety is prevention.

Q: Based on your experience, has the stigma that victims face when reporting domestic violence in Delaware changed in recent years?

Joe Myers: That's a tough one since I've only been here a couple of years, but I don't notice a huge stigma. I think awareness of resources has grown, and more people feel comfortable accessing help. Delaware has done a good job of normalizing seeking help and reducing barriers to reporting.

Q: You mentioned health equity earlier. What's being done to address that and reduce domestic violence from a health equity perspective?

Joe Myers: The DELTA AHEAD grant is currently focused on advancing health equity and addressing disparities. We fund member programs that partner with schools and community health centers to screen young people for domestic violence risk and connect them to support. We also work with community organizations, like the Sparrow Run Family Resource Center, to provide wraparound support, such as food pantries, gardens, and health screenings. These activities build community connectedness, which helps prevent violence. At the policy level, we advocate for economic and workplace justice, things like paid family leave, lactation spaces, and healthy environments for workers, all of which contribute to domestic violence prevention.

Q: Looking ahead, what are your hopes for the future of domestic violence prevention in Delaware?

Joe Myers: My hope is that we continue building on the great work happening now, making more connections, and collaborating with other coalitions, like the SHIP Coalition. A recent success story: one of our partners needed help getting youth access to the UD [University of Delaware] pool after a policy change. I made one phone call, and within a week, the barrier was lifted. It's a small example, but it shows how collaboration can open opportunities for youth to have safe, positive spaces.

Q: To wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add about domestic violence in Delaware?

Joe Myers: I'd just encourage everyone to grow their capacity to recognize and respond to domestic violence. We all influence others, friends, family, community members, and even small actions matter. If everyone takes one step each day toward creating safer, healthier communities, those small steps add up to big change. I'd love to see every community have spaces where people can simply be without having to pay for something or have a specific reason to be there. Those kinds of spaces build safety and belonging.