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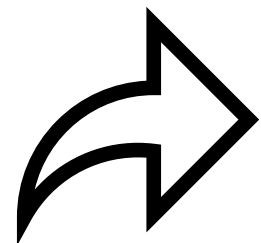
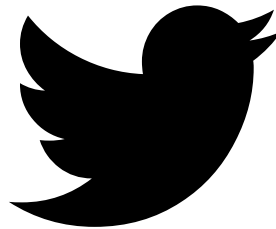
Domestic abuse victims in ‘worst-case scenario’ during outbreak, providers say



Housing program supervisor Magda Sellon in her office Wednesday at the YWCA in Glendale. Workers are providing services by videoconference or phone. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

By LAURA NEWBERRY, NICOLE SANTA CRUZ

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One evening last week, a 38-year-old woman showed up in the emergency room of a Los Angeles hospital. She had been beaten by her boyfriend.

Under normal circumstances, the hospital would contact a domestic violence advocate, who would meet with the woman in person and help her find shelter and other services. But that night, because of limitations on visitors and health guidelines due to COVID-19, an advocate had to connect by phone.

About a dozen calls later, the woman was placed in a shelter.

“We got lucky this time,” said Yvette Lozano, the chief program and operating officer for Peace Over Violence, a nonprofit focused on ending interpersonal relationship violence. “It’s really hard to find an immediate placement for someone in need.”



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

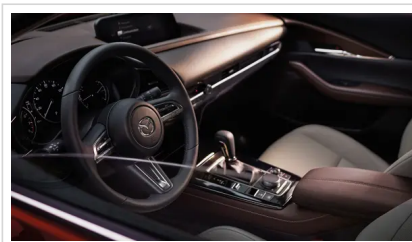
Column: Trapped at home: Coronavirus could be disastrous for domestic violence victims

March 16, 2020

Lozano and other advocates worry that the changes to everyday life brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic — stay-at-home mandates, job losses and school closures — may worsen already strained relationships, leading to increased rates of domestic abuse. Others are concerned that those who are suffering may be less inclined to report a crime or reach out for help.

“For someone who is in an abusive relationship, this is kind of a worst-case scenario,” said Alyson Messenger, a managing staff attorney with the Jenesse Center, a domestic violence organization based in South Los Angeles. “Compound that with the fact that access to services is more difficult than ever.”

This nightmare for domestic violence victims has already played out elsewhere. The number of such incidents in China has risen sharply as people across much of that country have been quarantined, according to Chinese news sources. Already, the National Domestic Violence Hotline has begun to field some highly distressing calls as quarantine measures have been implemented, said the hotline’s chief executive, Katie Ray-Jones.



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One woman said her partner threatened to throw her out onto the street if she showed any symptoms of COVID-19. Another said her partner vowed to prevent her from seeking medical care if she became sick.

Al Provinziano, a family lawyer in Los Angeles, said calls to his firm related to domestic violence doubled last week.

“People are saying that they can’t believe they’ll be stuck with their abuser, and that they don’t know how they’re going to get through this period of quarantine,” Provinziano said.

The idea that stress and isolation lead to higher rates of domestic violence is not new. During the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009, the National Domestic Violence Hotline fielded many calls from those in long-term abusive relationships who said the violence against them had grown more intense, said Ray-Jones.

Research has found a relationship between natural disasters and increased rates of interpersonal violence, especially among households that experience significant financial strain. After Hurricane Andrew, a Category 5 storm that made landfall in South Florida in 1992, spousal-abuse calls to Miami’s helpline increased by 50%, researchers found. In L.A., advocates saw domestic violence rise in the aftermath of the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

The concern isn't that quarantine will cause normally peaceful partners and parents to suddenly become abusive. Rather, it's likely that widespread isolation and stress-inducing conditions — such as job loss and feelings of helplessness — will increase the number and severity of such incidents in households that have already seen a cycle of violence, advocates say.

“Domestic violence is rooted in power and control,” Ray-Jones said. “When an abuser loses that power control, they tend to exert or take that out on the victims in their relationship.”

At the same time, survivors will be less able to break away from the surveillance of their abusers. And those who might have stayed with aging parents are less likely to do so now, as the elderly are far more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19.

It's estimated that more than 10 million people experience domestic violence in the U.S. each year, and the number of homicides related to domestic violence has been on the rise since 2010. In L.A. County, as overall homicides have declined, the number of women slain has steadily risen.

Income loss might also make it more difficult for victims to leave. Someone who has saved money in order to execute an escape plan may now be forced to use that cash in the face of job loss or a reduction in hours.

And when victims of domestic violence aren't out in the community, the red flags of abuse are less likely to be noticed by friends and family members.

“We get reports through schools or hospitals that somebody has had a physical injury, but kids aren't going to school right now, and people are avoiding hospitals,” said Tara Peterson, executive director of the YWCA of Glendale.



Support groups that typically meet in this room at the YWCA in Glendale are now being offered to survivors remotely through Zoom. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

The East Los Angeles Women's Center uses hundreds of trained *promotoras*, women who educate their communities about healthy relationships, to connect with those in East and South Los Angeles who are most at risk for violence, said Barbara Kappos, the center's executive director. Now, the women can't meet weekly and in-person to help those who may be the most resistant.

In response to COVID-19, the Los Angeles Police Department last week closed front desks and walk-up services to "ensure social distancing," a move that worried those who work with victims and depend on police to report abuse. The county courts are still open for essential functions, which include processing petitions for emergency domestic-violence restraining orders. Judges may still issue emergency protective orders at the request of law enforcement, which can lead to the temporary removal of an abuser from a home.

If victims are seeking a temporary restraining order or an emergency protective order, they can go to their local stations and will be assisted, said LAPD Assistant Chief Robert Arcos in an email.

Each station has a night-watch detective available to assist domestic violence victims, he said, and teams that respond to such incidents will continue to be deployed. As of Monday, Arcos said, he hadn't seen an increase in calls for service.

Meanwhile, organizations that provide services to domestic violence victims and survivors in L.A. County are forced to be creative in serving their clients. In-person support groups have been replaced by virtual ones. Therapists are deploying code words with their clients to keep them safe. Although many shelters are full across the county, hotlines are available.

Patti Giggans, executive director of Peace Over Violence, said her staff of about 70 is working remotely. Counseling and staff meetings have been conducted virtually.

"We're committed to not abandoning any people who are on our caseloads," she said.

Carmen McDonald, director of legal services at the Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice, worries that victims now will be less likely to seek services. Already, she said, she's seeing a decline in new clients and requests for legal assistance.

"We know what is going on with our clients, but we don't know what's going on with the other folks who need services," she said.

It is still uncertain how shelters for victims of domestic violence will be affected by the pandemic. But some warn that it may become increasingly difficult to find a spot at an emergency shelter.

Elizabeth Eastlund, executive director of Rainbow Services in San Pedro, said the organization's transitional and emergency shelters are full and aren't cycling people in and out due to the uncertainty of the pandemic. If clients don't have a solid plan for where they will go next, they're not leaving.

Peterson said the YWCA of Glendale's small shelter for domestic violence victims is open, and a handful of its 12 beds are available. The YWCA will provide vouchers for hotel rooms once the shelter is full.

The Glendale shelter is not screening residents for the coronavirus but does have a designated, private space for anyone presenting COVID-19 symptoms.

Though organizations that help survivors do not expect to halt services anytime soon, the pandemic has already affected their finances. The YWCA of Glendale had to cancel its biggest fundraiser, scheduled for April.

“We rely on that money to be able to be nimble and provide additional resources,” Peterson said. “We are monitoring the situation daily, but we’re concerned about being fully operational if this goes on longer than a couple of months.”

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) for the National Domestic Violence Hotline. You can also call L.A. County's hotline at 1-800-978-3600.