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Education is key to ending domestic violence

By Verna Wyatt

Current data show domestic violence slightly declining in Tennessee, and that is good news. But domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women — more than car accidents, muggings and rapes combined — and Tennessee still ranks in the top 10 states for violence against women.

Improving statistics may be due to the dedication of domestic violence advocates, who with government officials are realistically addressing the issue. Recently, Mayor Karl Dean had the vision to pull together advocates and law enforcement to assess the domestic violence problem in Nashville, and created a working plan using their recommendations.

One of the outcomes was hiring an accomplished advocate to help Nashville plan for a Family Justice Center, a comprehensive, progressive approach for addressing domestic violence together as a city. But efforts by advocates in other communities are not always as successful. Recently in Columbia, advocates urged the city to apply for a highly sought-after grant to begin the process of creating a Family Justice Center. The city was awarded the grant but unfortunately declined it due to opposition from a few local officials, leaving advocates stunned.

One barrier for successfully addressing the problem of domestic violence is awareness. Everyone in Tennessee should learn about this complicated problem, especially law enforcement and government officials. Otherwise, it will be business as usual, and Tennessee will continue to be a dangerous place for women and children. But understanding is difficult. It makes no sense that an offender declares great love for the victim and then routinely physically and emotionally abuses her. And a victim's reasons for staying in an abusive relationship, or returning numerous times, certainly defy logic.

However, there are patterns of behavior that we can understand. Domestic violence is not a “family matter” — it is a crime. It's not about anger, ignorance, alcohol, drugs, stress or socioeconomic standing. All those things can make domestic violence escalate, not cause it. The abuser learned this behavior somewhere and he's learned it works for him. The victim doesn't like the abuse, but stays for many reasons; she's been conditioned to think the problems are her fault, and the constant emotional abuse has destroyed her self-esteem.

Humans are hard-wired to survive — the victim's focus is simply to get through the day. Survivors of domestic violence often compare their staying to Stockholm Syndrome, where a hostage over time begins to identify with their kidnapper. Survival depends upon him. If the victim wants to leave, she is often isolated and financially disadvantaged. And the big reason for not leaving? Fear — and statistics prove that fear is real. A woman who leaves an abusive relationship increases her chances of being murdered by 75 percent.

The patterns are clear. The urgency is real. Communities need to learn about them so they can work together effectively.
