

Some domestic violence victims go silent during quarantine, but help is available

By Lois K. Solomon and Eileen Kelley

South Florida Sun Sentinel | Apr 23, 2020 | 3:43 PM

The quiet phones at some South Florida police agencies and shelters for the abused may be hiding a complex reality behind closed doors: domestic violence aggravated by the coronavirus lockdown.

Kids are now home all day, as are adults, limiting private places where the abused can make a phone call. It's hard for victims to find a safe place to flee, as they may fear infecting a friend or their parents or getting sick themselves in a new location.

Family lawyers are reporting fewer calls to their offices related to problems in the home, but are expecting a flood when restrictions are lifted. Women In Distress, a large shelter in Fort Lauderdale, says its phone lines have been ringing less over the past month, a signal that women are unaware help is still available.

Victims "are feeling much more helpless and trapped," said Lorrie Conglose, director of the domestic violence program at Ruth & Norman Rales Jewish Family Services in Boca Raton. "In normal times, it wouldn't be as difficult to leave."

The numbers released by law enforcement are difficult to parse as agencies measure the violence using an assortment of metrics.

In Miami-Dade, petitions for domestic restraining orders have decreased compared to the months before the pandemic. In Broward, there were 256 arrests for the single charge of domestic battery from March 6 to April 6, down from 288 the previous year. But this measurement does not include people arrested for domestic battery and other charges, such as child abuse or drug possession.

Still, some agencies are reporting upticks. In Palm Beach County, State Attorney Dave Aronberg says there has been a 17 percent increase in domestic battery cases since the lockdown began last month. He said half the first appearance cases, when the accused are brought before a judge for the first time, are now related to clashes in the home.

And some relief organizations for the battered say the number of calls they are receiving has increased dramatically. No More Tears, which assists human trafficking and domestic violence victims in South Florida, got 20 to 25 calls a day before the quarantine; now its volunteers are taking 40 to 50 calls a day from victims.

"It's complete chaos," said Somy Ali, No More Tears founder. "None of us have seen this in our lifetime."

Ali shared these stories of some victims who have come to No More Tears in recent weeks:

- The alcoholic husband of a 24-year-old woman brought to South Florida for an arranged marriage from India escalated the abuse in their marriage after the pandemic started and she could no longer work.

She called No More Tears from a grocery store where she saw its brochure and the shelter sent her a Lyft to a safe house.

- A 23-year-old woman stopped going to work because of the pandemic and her boyfriend began working from home. “Because of the extra time they were together the abuse escalated — in one instance, he pulled her hair and shouted at her because she left a dish in the sink instead of putting it in the dishwasher,” Ali said. She started slowly packing up her things and putting them in the trunk of her car. While her boyfriend was in the bathroom, she left with her kitten and called No More Tears from a parking lot.
- A 30-year-old woman called from New York and said she couldn’t find a bed at any shelter due to the pandemic. Her husband had been physically abusive and wouldn’t allow her to work. “She found us online and hid in her bathroom to call us — we made a plan so that the next time he would leave the house, we would call her a Lyft to the airport,” Ali said.

None of these cases reached the point of arrest, showing how hard it is to document abuse inflamed by the lockdown.

Many victims are unaware that assistance is still available, said Mary Riedel, president of Women In Distress.

Women In Distress typically gets 2,200 calls for help a month, Riedel said. But once people were told to stay at home, the number of calls to the crisis line greatly diminished.

To Riedel, that sounded an alarm. She said people are stuck at home under constant watch by their abusers and unable to sneak away to call the crisis line.

“These are challenging times and we’ve been concerned about that since the beginning,” Riedel said, There are other compounding problems, she said.

Lost with the stay-at-home orders are the eyes and ears of coworkers and school faculty who may be able to spot when someone is showing up with bruises and other signs of abuse.

And then there is the matter of social distancing guidelines.

Riedel said Women In Distress had to cut the number of emergency beds at its 132-bed facility in half to keep residents at a reasonable distance from each other.

Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse, a Palm Beach County shelter, also had to cut its 64-bed capacity in half to enforce social distancing, said Jennifer Rey, program services director. The shelter is full and has been referring callers to other sites, she said.

There is also confusion about whether courts are still open. They are. Still, Mindy Jones, supervising attorney at Coast to Coast Legal Aid in Plantation, said calls from domestic violence victims to her office are 55 percent lower than before the lockdown.

In an April 13 memo, Jack Tuter, chief judge for the 17th judicial circuit which serves Broward County, sought to make it clear the courts are still functioning, including for domestic violence cases.

He said the domestic violence division has held hearings for more than 440 petitions since March 16 and entered orders in 222 cases where the victim was seeking protection.

“Emergencies are still getting the attention of the court,” said Jonathan Schiller, a family law attorney in Fort Lauderdale.

When restrictions begin to be lifted, Schiller said he expects a wave of new petitions to be filed at courthouses as victims feel freer to make phone calls and leave their homes.

“In June and July,” he said, “there will be a huge surge.”

If you need assistance, please contact the following:

- To report domestic violence, call 9-1-1.
- Women in Distress, Broward, 954-761-1133.
- AVDA, Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse, Palm Beach County, 561-265-3797.
- No More Tears, serving all of South Florida, 954-324-7669.
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-96-ABUSE.

Lois Solomon can be reached at lsolomon@sunsentinel.com.

Eileen Kelley can be reached at 772-925-9193 or ekelley@sunsentinel.com. Follow her on Twitter @reporterkell.

<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/coronavirus/fl-ne-domestic-violence-up-20200423-b7bsplkg2fgyxialtspfcgpy-story.html>