

Advocates for domestic violence victims discuss COVID-19 challenges, ways to support victims

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Advocates and experts on domestic violence likely saw this coming: the response to keep people safe from COVID-19 would result in greater harm for victims of domestic violence. All of that time isolated and at home alone with an abusive partner has meant that the severity of the abuse can increase.

According to Futures Without Violence, a health and [social justice](#) nonprofit working to end various forms of abuse, increases in reports of [domestic violence](#) have occurred in a number of cities. The online chat options on websites supporting victims has also seen an uptick, indicating that victims likely feel unsafe attempting to call for help while in the home with their abuser.

And the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, a statewide domestic [violence](#) coalition representing 200 organizations, reports an increase in calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline with more than 8,000 calls and texts from

California between Feb. 24 and May 19. On March 16, the hotline began tracking reports that specifically cited COVID-19, and more than 1,000 of the calls and texts received from California were related to the pandemic between March 16 and May 19. The hotline also noted that California is in the top percentile of COVID-19-related calls in the nation, according to Jacquie Marroquin, director of programs for the California Partnership.

"What weighs most heavily on advocates on the ground is the fact that there are many more survivors who are unable to reach out at all because they are with the person who is causing them harm 24/7," Marroquin said.

Esta Soler, president and founder of Futures Without Violence, and Marroquin took some time to discuss what victims of domestic violence face, particularly during this pandemic, as well as the kinds of support that are necessary and most helpful. (This email interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

Q: What are some of the ways in which COVID-19 has contributed to the increase in reports of abuse?

Soler: We see the impacts in two major ways: First, for those who are sheltering at home, the constant presence of an [abusive partner](#) and the inability to get out of the house or apartment creates and enhances danger. Isolating a victim from friends and family is a primary tool of the abuser and now the pandemic is causing that to happen. Second, survivors may be even more desperate than in the past to keep their jobs because they know that job is the only thing providing economic security. Being forced to work in unsafe conditions is also a consequence of this pandemic, and this in turn can also mean survivors who are parents are forced to leave their children in less-than-ideal conditions.

Q: What is the response to this virus exposing about domestic violence?

Marroquin: The domestic violence field has been grappling with the fact that there are many survivors who do not reach out for assistance because they don't want to separate from their abusive partners; many simply want the abuse to stop and be a healthy, safe family. And here we are, with a global pandemic whose appropriate response is to stay home with our families. In much of our work at the Partnership, we have been pivoting to services for the entire family, including those who cause harm. And truthfully, if we want to end domestic violence once and for all, there must be robust interventions for those who do cause harm, regardless if they are together or separated.

Q: Can you talk a bit about support networks and escape plans, and what these personal support systems should look like during the pandemic?

Soler: Futures Without Violence has published "Calling All Family and Friends of Families Experiencing Violence at Home," which includes links to support services and hotlines. It also offers recommendations for helping someone at risk create a support network and explains how we can all be part of it. It is geared toward how we can all help those who may be isolated and struggling with violence or abuse during the coronavirus public health emergency. It talks about the importance of reaching out, helping with basic necessities, finding safe ways to interrupt or intervene, providing virtual or physical respite, sending texts or handwritten letters of love and encouragement to those who are hurting, and more. Despite the obstacles, there are still many ways to help people who are at risk right now.

Marroquin: Support for survivors should always be rooted in nonjudgmental connection, regardless of who is providing that support. Crisis lines and law enforcement are not generally a survivor's first call; it is often family, friends or faith leaders who survivors turn to for support. I worked with many survivors who waited years to reach out because of a negative or victim-blaming reaction from the first person to whom they first told their story. So, in terms of support networks, the most important thing

anyone can do is to be supportive without judgment. To trust the survivor when they tell you they are not ready to leave because they need a plan. Then to reach out to a domestic violence organization that can help to create a plan with the survivor.

Survivors leave an abusive relationship an average of seven to nine times. For loved ones, that alone can lead to frustration and anger, resulting in increased levels of isolation and fear of reaching out for help again. During this pandemic, patience with both the process of leaving an abusive relationship, and the process of healing for a family that wants to stay together, is essential. It's not easy, but it's the best support we can offer.

Q: What does a domestic violence response, specifically tailored to COVID-19, ideally look like? What kinds of resources should we be thinking about and providing?

Marroquin: Flexibility. Flexibility. Flexibility. Every household, every [survivor](#), and every family dynamic is different. We always say there is no "one size fits all" solution. ... Whether it's financial assistance, counseling, support groups, emergency shelter, community prevention efforts, or legal assistance, flexibility in the way survivors and their families utilize these services is essential for a COVID-19 tailored response. Ultimately, any pandemic response would ideally involve a range of immediate responses that then turn into long-term services that facilitate healing for survivors, regardless if they are with or separated from the person who caused them harm. That is our vision for domestic violence-free families and communities in California.

Soler: Put simply, we need to prioritize preventing violence and addressing the needs of victims of domestic violence because doing so saves lives. ... We also MUST understand that this will continue and maybe even worsen in the short term since the economic recovery will take months if not years. This won't end magically with the lifting of stay-at-home orders. We ask people to stay engaged and keep helping your [family](#) and friends and supporting policy responses that help adults and children affected by domestic violence survive, heal and thrive.

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