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FEATURED

Safety for domestic violence victims more challenging under stay-at-home order

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A staff member disinfects the kitchen area at Welcome Inn, a shelter in Mankato run by Partners for Affordable Housing. Courtesy Jen Theneman



MANKATO — Minnesota's stay-at-home order poses a unique set of challenges for victims of domestic abuse and their advocates.

When Gov. Tim Walz's stay-at-home order went into effect March 28, calls to the Committee Against Domestic Abuse initially dropped. But CADA Executive Director Jason Mack said the pace started to pick up. He said they are bracing for more calls and have been looking at alternative ways for people in crisis to contact them.

"We know that (stay-at-home order) is going to put more stress on relationships and that relationship violence is likely to increase," Mack said. "It becomes a lot harder for people to reach out when they're at home with the person who is abusing them."

CADA Community Advocacy Manager Erika Boyer said the decline in phone calls in particular hasn't come as a surprise, despite what they expect will be a greater number of victims.

"If you're at home with an abusive person, you're probably not able to call for help where people can hear your conversations," Boyer said. "They don't have those same opportunities to get out of the home and call us, like going to work or out for coffee with a friend or a family member."

In response, CADA opened a text-only hotline, and advocates are using other innovative ways for people in crisis to reach them, whether that's Facebook or online chatrooms through their website.

Along with the emergency shelter and advocacy office in Mankato, CADA operates six other offices in south-central Minnesota.

"We are still offering in-person services," Mack said. "For people that over-the-phone or video conferencing is not an option, we will still see people in our offices."

The organization provides clients everything from emotional support and community resources to legal help, such as filling out a restraining order or reporting abuse. CADA has a working relationship with Partners for Affordable Housing, which runs two shelters in Mankato and one in St. Peter.

Jen Theneman, executive director for Partners for Affordable housing, said they are brainstorming how to best serve some of the most vulnerable people in the community in response to the shelter-in-place order, especially now that families are spending more time under the same roof. That means when a client calls, it's hard to determine if they can speak freely.

“One of my case managers is questioning whether that might be happening with her client,” Theneman said. “They’ve communicated by phone and text message, but even phone or email can be accessed by the person that’s abusing them.”

She said others might be able to reach them without drawing suspicion, whether that’s a therapist, a friend or a family member. So, if they need to flee, they can.

“We’ve had women who have just driven to us to flee a situation and the kids didn’t have shoes on or diapers,” Theneman said. “First and foremost, if they’re ready to flee and go, we want to support that as quickly as possible, so they can be safe and not worry about all the other things that we can circle back to.”

Another issue is capacity. Partners for Affordable Housing’s two Mankato shelters, Welcome Inn and Theresa House, have a total of 34 beds, and Union Street Place in St. Peter has 20 beds. CADA is a 22-bed shelter, of which shelter manager Andrea Gilbert said is often at full capacity, and that was before the stay-at-home order.

The two organizations are partnering to pool resources not only in Mankato but with other shelters throughout south-central Minnesota to ensure if one shelter is full, another one can take them in.

“If CADA doesn’t have any space, they can come stay with us but still utilize some of the counseling services that CADA provides,” Theneman said.

Both organizations also are trying to expand access to other temporary housing if the shelters are full. “We’re going to be working on an emergency grant that will allow us to do extended hotel stays,” Mack said. “We’ve always done hotel stays as an option, but this would allow us to do a longer-term hotel stay for some folks.”

Mack said community support is more important now than ever. Law enforcement are often the first responders during a domestic violence crisis and work closely with CADA to connect victims with resources once they’re separated from their abuser. Two officers serve on CADA’s board of directors, Waseca Police Chief Penny Vought and North Mankato Police Chief Ross Gullickson.

Vought said her officers call shelters and advocates for domestic violence victims following domestic calls, which so far haven’t increased or decreased in Waseca since the stay-at-home order went into effect, although police there have recently responded to threats and child custody issues.

Both the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Department and the Mankato Department of Public Safety reported those numbers have been the same compared to last year. But Public Safety Director Amy Vokal said the department is looking at any underlying issues that may point to an abusive relationship and Capt. Paul Barta of the Sheriff's Department said they are keeping close tabs on any changing numbers or trends.

Gullickson said his department has seen an uptick in domestic disturbance calls. In March, the North Mankato Police Department had 20 domestic calls, compared to 11 at the same time last year.

"I think it's safe to say that a theme among them has been related to the stay-at-home order, where people feel a little bit more stressed and cooped up at home," Gullickson said.

Mack said the complicating nature of domestic abuse during the stay-at-home order means friends and family members of people in abusive relationships are now more important than ever in playing the role of advocates.

"For friends and family that may know of people in that sort of relationship, just reach out a little more often. Check in and see how they're doing because it's more normal for a friend and family member to call someone and say, 'How are you?' as opposed to a CADA advocate," Mack said.

"If friends and family call our hotline, we can give them some tips on how to work with folks that are going through this."

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse, CADA's crisis line is 1-800-477-0466 or text 507-223-4200.

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