

Safety Net News

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Domestic abuse amid Covid-19

By Jane Otto
McLeod Alliance Volunteer

With Covid-19's worldly onset came an unsettling increase in domestic violence. The United Nations called it the "shadow pandemic."

The NY Times reported in its July 2 issue that Britain had 26 people die as a result of domestic abuse. In March alone, domestic abuse took the lives of 16 British women and girls, three times the number killed in March 2019.

The Guardian also reported increases of domestic abuse in Brazil, China, Germany, and Greece.

Medical News Today said that reported cases of domestic violence has risen in France by 30 percent. Cyprus and Singapore have seen an increase in calls to helplines by about a third, and Argentina by 25 percent. In Hubei, a Wusan province, domestic violence

reports had tripled during the quarantine in February.

As for the United States, no official figures are available indicating Covid-19's effect on domestic violence.

The U.S. Army just recently reported a significant decrease in domestic abuse. However, other experts stated that isolation keeps victims silent, hence they doubt the validity of those statistics.

Minnesota's response

Like those Army statistics, it's difficult to determine if Minnesota has witnessed a domestic abuse uptick.

"There's no consistency across the state as to whether there is an increase or a decrease," said Liz Richards, executive director of Violence Free Minnesota (VFMN). "A lot of confusion existed statewide as to whether programs were open or not."



Liz Richards

Richards stressed that all programs "were available in different ways, but all were open."

At the stay-at-home order's onset, VFMN designed and laminated flyers listing the Day One Crisis Hotline number.

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Online-based violence

UN Women, an entity of the United Nations, is concerned about women and girls using the Internet, and even more so during the viral pandemic.
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Log onto our Web site at
www.mcleodalliance.org
for current news.

From the Director's desk:

Finding new and creative ways to serve

What a Spring season we had here at the Alliance.

First . . . a big thank you to United Way of McLeod County for donating some office furniture they no longer needed. We appreciate it.

We also thought it might be a nice uneventful time to finally update some of our office equipment. Well, not so much. Although it has seemed quieter in our office due to the pandemic, we are currently experiencing an uphill trend in client numbers.

What we have done, however, is found new and innovative ways to attend community needs. The majority of our services are now



Rhonda Buerkle

provided via phone or online. We are in constant contact with other domestic violence agencies statewide, brainstorming and collaborating to promote and provide the best possible options for our clients and their families.

Support groups, in addition, have resumed with social distancing guidelines in place. We encourage interested people to call our office for more information.

Thank you so much to all who continue to donate and support our agency. We are always grateful.

A safe and happy summer to all!

Rhonda Buerkle
Executive Director

From the Board Chair:

We are here for *all* victims

As the board president I want to express my sincere gratitude to our staff for their unbelievable dedication to our clients. Through this pandemic, they have continued to find ways to support clients and provide them the handholding, shoulder to lean on and emotional support while socially distancing.

Domestic violence knows no color, race or religion. A victim of domestic violence is still a victim no matter the color of their skin, their social status, their level of income, their race, religion or sexual orientation.

Our organization will continue to fight for any victim of domestic violence. We will continue to find ways to support their needs within our



Susan Noyes

communities. We are fortunate to have so many volunteers and donors who want to help and don't care about the things that divide us, but think about raising the victims into survivors.

Love each other for the quality of their character rather than judging based on group think. Before you judge someone, understand you can never walk in their shoes or know the hills they have climbed nor can they know yours. Be nice to each other, love and support one another.

Once again, I want to thank all of those who support our organization. We will need your continued support through these uncertain times. Thank you.

Susan Noyes
Board Chair



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Financial duress another concern

Continued from front page

Those flyers were sent to all 90 programs to be posted in essential businesses in their areas.

“Different people were doing what they could do locally,” Richards said.

VFMN worked with Hospitality Minnesota to get the crisis hotline number printed on the bottom of liquor store receipts. The agency also developed a 30-second public service announcement.

McLeod Alliance was one of those open programs. During the first few months of the stay-at-home order, Legal Advocate Karina Robeck staffed the office alone. Though the Day One Crisis Hotline and Standpoint saw a 25 percent increase in calls during the first week of that order, Robeck saw a decline in calls here. The majority of those calls, she said, were for assistance with filing harassment restraining orders (HRO) and orders for protection (OFP).

“I used the Minnesota Guide and File and walked clients

through the process of filing online,” she said.

As for HROs and OFPs, Richards said that court data reflected a 25 percent decline in filing numbers. During the stay-at-home order, “courts were closed and it was difficult for victims to figure out how to file a protection order.”

Another possible reason for the decrease was that only remote advocacy was available. “People couldn’t walk into an office and seek help,” she said.

Courts are now open and the most recent data shows that OFPs have returned to its pre-Covid numbers, Richards said, adding that there’s a three percent increase in harassment and restraining orders.

Though no large increase in domestic abuse statewide is apparent, Richards said that she has learned from police chiefs in the metro area and surrounding suburbs that they have answered slightly more domestic calls than usual, but the severity of those calls has increased.

That hasn’t been the situation in McLeod County. “We have had pretty severe cases, said McLeod Alliance Advocate Glynis Vacek, “but I don’t know if there is an increase in them.”

Other concerns

The pandemic is also not without its economic impact. “The stay-at-home order has created loss of jobs, which in turn has created financial duress for some survivors,” Richards said.

VFMN received \$250,000 via a MN Disaster Relief Fund Grant, which is specifically designated for survivors. Richards explained that each award they distributed was capped at \$1,000.

“That \$250,000 is almost fully expended. The needs were pretty extreme across the state,” she said. “It didn’t go far. And, \$1,000 – it certainly isn’t enough for the rent.”

Richards expressed a concern as to what the economic fallout will bring with regards to

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Minnesota Guide and File

If you or someone you know needs to file a harassment restraining order or an order for protection, you can do so online at <http://www.mncourts.gov/guide-and-file>.

It’s a free online interview tool provided by the Minnesota Judicial Branch.

The Alliance can assist you with this, if you have any problems maneuvering the site.

The web site offers a question-and-answer interview to help you fill out the needed form. At its conclusion, you can file the forms electronically, or print the forms and file them at the courthouse.

The site also offers “Next Steps” instructions that explain what to do with your forms and how the court process works.

Call the Alliance for assistance or more information at 320-234-7933.



Be watchful of online gender-based violence

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Its web site (www.unwomen.org) states its concern about women and girls using the Internet more during Covid-19 as a way to stay connected with the world. UN Women warns that this use makes them targets of online violence, such as physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking, zoom-bombing and sex trolling.

Cecilia Mwende Maundu, a broadcast journalist based in Kenya and a specialist in gender digital safety, offered her top digital safety tips on the UN Women web site.

Below is Maundu's top digital safety tips and her answers to questions regarding online violence as they appeared on the UN Women's web site.

Why is it important to make the distinction between offline and online violence during COVID-19?

Online gender-based violence exists within a context similar to what happens in real life. It is just as destructive as offline violence.

We now live in a virtual society and offline violence has extended to online, which makes it easier for people to commit violence without consequences. Women are the main targets of online violence, especially women with voices, like female journalists and politicians. Online harassment can include online bullying, trolling, cyber stalking, defamation and hate speech, public shaming, and identity theft and hacking, amongst other offenses. I provide training on how women can protect their identities online.

Men are also harassed online, but when women are the target,



online harassment quickly descends into sexualized hate or threats. Online gender-based violence is an overt expression of the deeply rooted gender inequalities in our society.

What are the impacts to women and girls when they experience violence online?

The greatest impact that we are experiencing is self-censorship. Women start censoring themselves online. And that is what the abusers want.

Online violence attempts to keep women from a major sector of the public sphere. The law in Kenya is yet to catch up with technology. For example, the police only take physical violence seriously. Just because it's online does not make the violence any less harmful.

Some women even leave the online platform [after being harassed]. When journalists have to self-censor themselves, the fundamental right to freedom of information is under attack.

Online violence is a public health issue and the effects are very detrimental. It results in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm, and erodes self-esteem.

Have you seen online violence in Kenya increase because of COVID-19?

Oh, definitely. In Kenya, like in many parts of the world, we are experiencing more requests for support due to attacks on feminist websites and social media pages. Many attackers have been successful hacking into and gaining control over women's and activists' accounts.

When the first COVID-19 patient in Kenya, a young girl, was released from hospital, it was terrible for her. People bashed her online. Some even said she was not sick and that she had been paid by the government. Her private photos were released online.

What can governments and individuals do to stop online violence against women and girls?

First, we need public awareness. Even when I talk to my friends, many of them say online violence is no big deal. People need to understand this is real; that it's real violence with real impacts. And sometimes it moves from online to offline.

What is gender digital safety?

Digital security is the protection of someone's identity online. Gender digital security includes training women and girls to protect themselves, as they are the most vulnerable group online.

I want women and girls to know that they are part of social media and it is their right to be online. There are tools and tips that can help us be safe. For example, Instagram has recently added a 'Restrict' anti-bullying tool that is available to everyone, because no one should push you off the online platform. Some of my basic digital security tips include:

- 1. Create a strong password.*
- 2. Download apps from authentication platforms and use two-factor authentication.*
- 3. Log out of your accounts.*
- 4. Don't use public WIFI for sharing sensitive information like online bank details.*
- 5. Use antivirus software and if possible, use a virtual private network.*

All programs are open

Continued from page 3

domestic violence. When there are increases in stressors, such as economic and medical, she said that there is typically an increase in domestic violence and sexual assault.

"Not that one causes the other, but it's like putting gasoline on a fire," she explained.

Children are another concern for Richards with the advent of online schooling. "Teachers are seeing concerning behaviors in the background while they work virtually with the students," Richards said. "It may not be new or increasing, but it's creating concerns for teachers."

The incidents may not warrant contacting Child Protection Services, but teachers don't know what to do, Richards said.

Because of the pandemic, children are not being brought in for their well checkups or vaccinations, Richards said.

Hence, those points of intervention outside the family for children are decreasing.

Here to help

Remembering that all programs are open is essential, said Richards. "They are being very creative in how they are doing their work."

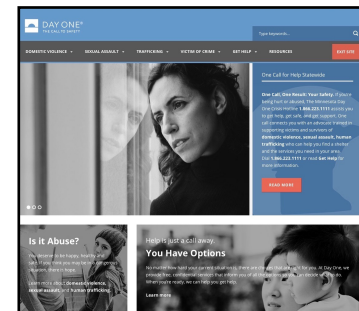
Though the Alliance office is open, they encouraged people to call first. "Many things can be handled over the phone," Vacek said. "We can assist people with protection orders and harassment orders over the phone, as well as ongoing support."

The Alliance web site now offers a chat feature that allows someone to contact the agency discreetly. The Alliance also has safe home options when needed and shelters are open statewide, Vacek said. If a survivor needs shelter, advocates encourage clients to call the Day One Crisis Hotline at 866-223-1111.

Online chat options

If it's unsafe to make a phone call, remember that the McLeod Alliance web site now has an "online chat" feature. The link is in the upper righthand corner. It's available 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

When the Alliance is unavailable, another option is the chat line on the Day One Crisis web site. According to its web site, Day One is a champion for equality and human rights. It ensures that no call for help goes unanswered. Day One is a statewide program of Comerstone.



Our wish list

The community donates many needed items to the Alliance for which they are forever grateful. Presently, our clients particularly need:

✓ Toilet paper

✓ Tissues

Cash donations are always appreciated. We can then use the money toward specific items that we may need later.

Thank you for your generosity!

Do you need flyers?

If you, your business, or school would like some of our flyers, "How to Help a Friend," please call us at 320-234-7933 or email us at besafe@hutchtel.net. It offers guidance as to helping others in an abusive relationship. The brochure is also available in Spanish.



News briefs

Alliance office is open

Please remember that the Alliance office is open 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The staff asks that you call, if possible, prior to coming as many issues can be addressed over the phone. Proper hygiene procedures are also followed.

Weekly Hispanic support group

Every Wednesday Bilingual Advocate Ofelia Vergara leads a Spanish-speaking support group for survivors. The meetings are about 90 minutes long. The group

adheres to social distancing guidelines.

Day care is also provided. For more information, call Ofelia at 320-234-7933.

Alliance receives several grants

The Alliance is fortunate to receive several grants during the past quarter. The United Way gave the agency \$4,700.

Southwest Initiative Foundation awarded the Alliance a \$5,000 grant to assist the office with the Covid-19 response. It will be used to supplement a new advocate initiated response program.

McLeod Cooperative Power awarded the Alliance a \$300 grant. Also Brian Renner of Edina Realty, Hutchinson, nominated the Alliance for a monetary donation. Hence, the Edina Realty Foundation gave the agency \$1,000.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS

April 1, 2020 through June 30, 2020

Ralph Johnson
Bob & Ellen Sylvester – In honor of
Linda & Jim Karkoff's 50th anniversary
Jessica Lukes Cuhel
Frontstream
Medtronic
Edward Jones Investments
Linda & Jim Karkoff
– In honor of Bob & Ellen Sylvester
and In honor of Jane Lien

Jeanette Bening
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Brian Brosz
Nora Lopez – In honor of Les Young
Gary Schott
Vicky Powers
Carol Arlt

In-Kind
McLeod County United Way
– office furniture



Thank you to all the groups and individuals who have generously provided in-kind donations to our organization. Your gift truly makes a difference in the lives of those affected by domestic violence!

Meet Stephanie Okash

She is the Alliance's newest board member

Birthplace: I was born in Lapeer, Michigan, however raised in Minnesota.

Age: 30

Education: Master's Degree of Social Work, St. Cloud State University; Bachelor's Degree of Social Work, Minnesota State University Moorhead

Employment: Psychotherapist at Hutchinson Health

Hobbies: Hiking, paddle boarding, exercising, listening to podcasts, camping, and reading

Joined the Board: February, 2020

Why did you want to serve on the Alliance

Board: I have a strong interest in supporting children and victims of domestic violence.

During undergraduate schooling, I worked as a safe exchange/visitation coordinator. I witnessed the fear and unsettling feelings of families of domestic violence during visitations.



Stephanie Okash

The level of support, validation, and compassion needed to be an advocate is something for which I have a high regard.

Throughout graduate school, I focused my research on intimate partner violence and interviewed local shelters in Willmar and St. Cloud.

I currently work as a therapist, but wanted to be a part of McLeod Alliance as I value the organization's mission and the services it provides this community.

I hope to continue to learn and volunteer my time in anyway that can be of asset to the Alliance.

My hope is that the Alliance continues to uphold a strong partnership with law enforcement, so together they can provide education, support, protection and advocacy. Statewide my hope is that there will be an increase in emergency safe housing and funding.

Calendar of Events

August

Black Business Month

No McLeod Alliance Board meeting

September

National Recovery Month

September 18: 5:15 p.m. McLeod Alliance Board digital meeting

October

National Domestic Violence Awareness Month

Ongoing

Hispanic Support Group meets weekly on Wednesdays, while Support Group meets Thursdays. Masks and social distancing are required. For more information, call the Alliance office at (320) 234-7933

McLeod Alliance, Inc.
P.O. Box 393
Hutchinson, MN 55350

Receiving duplicates? Incorrect addresses? New person in position?

We'd like to know. Please contact the Alliance by mail, e-mail, fax, or phone, and we'll take care of the problem. Thanks.

McLeod Alliance, Inc. Staff

Executive Director
Rhonda Buerkle

Advocacy Coordinator
Glynis Vacek

Bilingual Advocacy Program
Ofelia Vergara

Legal Advocate
Karina Robeck

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Please invest in your local
United Way . . .



United Way of McLeod County

United Way
Helps Here

Telephone: 320-234-7933
Out of Area: 800-934-0851
Fax: 320-234-6317

E-Mail: mavdv@hutchtel.net
Web site: www.mcleodalliance.org

