

The Children Are Watching

The abuse or murder of a child by a parent or household member is a part of our everyday news. Recent studies have shown that forty percent of all child fatalities are related to domestic violence. National awareness of domestic violence has brought this issue from behind closed doors to one of great public importance. The effect of domestic violence on our children has become a political issue that has pushed Florida's legislature into constructing provisions that will allow victims accessibility to pursue relief through our judicial system.

In a survey of over six thousand American households in which wives were victims of domestic violence, fifty percent of the children also experienced some form of violence. Psychologists have agreed that violence witnessed by a child equals violence experienced by a child. These children learn to accept their parents' behavior as normal because they have no other standard by which to guide their perceptions. Studies have shown that children who witness domestic violence acts are more aggressive and exhibit antisocial behaviors that often carry over into their adult lives.

Estimates range from three to ten million children witness domestic violence in their home each year. Parents often do not realize that their children are effected regardless of whether or not they witness the actual abuse take place or not. Many children hide and listen to the breaking of objects, the verbal threats, and the physical blows. Thus, children experience high anxiety levels stemming from the fear that a parent could potentially be fatally harmed. In addition to that fear, children often feel torn due to conflicting loyalties for their parents and develop guilt associated with not being able to

help the abused parent. This type of exposure to domestic violence has short and long-term emotional and behavioral consequences for children.

The Florida's Legislature recognized the need to provide civil remedies and has been diligently working with the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence to write legislation that will enhance accessibility for the relief needed by women and children.

In 2001, fifty- eight thousand people in Florida filed for protective relief with the courts, a number which far surpasses that of past years. This relief is critical for women and children who are fleeing from an abusive home.

Governor Bush signed Senate Bill 716 into law this past legislative session. This bill eliminates the filing fee for domestic violence victims, increases the penalties for violation of the protection order, and ensures that Florida will continue to receive federal funds to assist victims. In addition, the bill will also make it easier for the courts to establish jurisdiction for victims using the following criteria: where the domestic violence incident took place, where the perpetrator lives, or where the victim currently resides.

Victims can seek relief through the court by petitioning for a temporary restraining order, individually or on behalf of their child(ren). If children are involved or witnessed domestic violence the judge will direct the Department of Children and Families to investigate. Judges have specific powers to enable them to ensure family safety and use these judicial powers to see that adequate efforts are made to ensure the safety of the children and the adult victims. Options a judges may select include: court ordering a respondent to enroll in a certified batterer's intervention program; a mental health evaluation; and/or alcohol or drug counseling.

The help available for victims is growing with public awareness. Shelter houses are disseminating information throughout communities in an attempt to reach as many victims as possible. Reassuring victims that they are not alone, that help is available, and providing education to batterers, victims, law enforcement, and the public may effectively stop the cycle of domestic violence. With law enforcement working concurrently with advocates to aid and assist domestic violence victims, the community outreach is growing. It seems reasonable to conclude that effective intervention is a necessity. The most important element of intervention is knowledge and education.