

## Defining domestic violence

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence defines domestic violence as “the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another.”

### 10 million victims

In the U.S., an average of 20 people experience intimate partner physical violence every minute. This equates to more than 10 million abuse victims annually.

On a typical day, domestic violence hotlines nationwide receive more than 20,000 calls.

### Intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime.

Intimate partner violence is most common against women between the ages of 18 and 24.

### Injury and rape

One in seven women and one in 25 men have been injured by an intimate partner. One in 10 women has been raped by an intimate partner. Data is unavailable for male victims.

### Stalking

One in four women and one in nine men experience severe physical violence, sexual violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner. One in seven women and one in 18 men have been stalked.

### Weapons

Nineteen percent of intimate partner violence involves a weapon. An abuser's access to a firearm increases the risk by 400% that they will murder their female partner.

Source: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, <https://ncadv.org>

## “There is domestic violence going on ALL THE TIME”

BY HILARY HOLLADAY  
Staff Writer

During a sentencing hearing for a domestic violence case in Orange County, a woman stepped forward to make her victim impact statement. Visibly nervous but speaking in a clear, purposeful voice, she testified that her then-husband had choked, punched and attempted to strangle her in their home. When a neighbor came to investigate her screams and asked if she was OK, she said she wasn't. The neighbor called the police and managed to pull her out the door to safety.

In her statement, the woman said the attack had forever changed her life. She said she remains anxious and afraid and has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Judge Dale Durrer sentenced the defendant to five years in prison, with four years suspended, a year in jail with six months suspended and four years of supervised probation.

Orange County Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Katie Fitzgerald prosecuted the case. She said during a recent interview that domestic violence is a problem locally, just as it is everywhere else: “I think this is the ugly truth of every community. There is domestic violence going on all the time.”

She estimates her office handles 20 to 35 domestic violence cases each month and a total of 250 per year, and she said 88% of the victims in Orange County are women. Among the individuals she has worked with are repeat victims—women who have been assaulted by a series of partners.

Cases can come in from state, county and town law enforcement agencies. Orange County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Mike LaCasse said that since January 1, the sheriff's office has had 45 “reportable domestic-related incidents” including a total of 29 involving intimate partners—that is, spouses, ex-spouses, “boyfriends and girlfriends,” “ex-boyfriends and girlfriends” and one engaged couple. The remainder involved other family relationships, such as a parent and child.

LaCasse said deputies never know what to expect when they get a call about a domestic incident. It may be a shouting match, which in itself does not qualify as a crime, or it may be a frightening, unpredictable scenario.

As a hypothetical example, he said, “I get a call from the wife. The husband's drunk, they get into an argument, the husband's pushed the wife down, is belligerent. When I arrive, the wife is quieter and doesn't necessarily want to tell [me] what's going on.”

“You've got to figure out exactly

what is going on. There's nothing easy about a domestic violence investigation once you go to it,” he continued. “When someone's house gets broken into, they're glad you're there. When it's a domestic violence crime, sometimes nobody wants you there, even though you were called there.”

He said there are times “when you go to one of these [scenes], and you see the fear in the victim's eyes—so bad that they felt the need to call the police—then talk to the offender, and you see the belligerent attitude and the aggressive way they deal with the victim.”

However, fear and various other emotions may prevent a victim from pressing charges.

As Orange Police Chief Jim Fenwick explains it, a fight between two persons not in an intimate relationship typically results from a “single specific issue”—which he likens to the visible part of an iceberg.

But with domestic violence, he said, “We are also dealing with that underwater part of the iceberg—the unknown issues that have built up over weeks, months and years to the episodes of domestic violence. What can make these types of calls so dangerous for officers is that tense emotions are interwoven throughout all of these issues, plus the added potential elements of children and financial issues.”

### Dilemma of victims unwilling to testify

Fitzgerald also must deal with the reluctance of some victims to press charges. Whether out of fear of their abusers, love for them, concern they and their children will have no place to live if the abusive partner is locked up and no longer paying the bills—or some combination thereof—these victims don't want to testify.

Fitzgerald said uncooperative victims are such a concern that the Commonwealth's Attorneys' Services Council was making it a focus of a five-day training session on the investigation and prosecution of intimate-partner violence. Orange County was one of 12 commonwealth's attorneys' offices selected from across the state to participate in the program. Each prosecutor was to be accompanied by a local law enforcement officer, though LaCasse said this week that no one from the Orange County Sheriff's

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## SURVIVAL story

BY HILARY HOLLADAY  
Staff Writer

She is a tall, middle-aged woman with dark circles under her eyes. Dressed for work, she will head to her job later in the day. For now, she is seated at a table with Cindy Hedges, executive director of SAFE, the regional program for victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault.

She has agreed to talk, anonymously, about her life as a survivor of domestic violence. As she speaks, her voice rises; her eyes shine. Vying with her anger and grief is determination. With the help of Hedges and the SAFE staff, she is learning to see beyond the horrors of her past and make viable plans for the future.

For SAFE, she is a tangible success story. The nonprofit agency often loses track of the women and men they help, because, as Hedges says, they don't want to revisit a traumatic time in their lives. But this woman has stayed in touch. She speaks eloquently about her newfound ability to see the patterns of violence in her past.

The trouble started when she was a very young child and her mother died. Not long after, she lost an older sister. Soon, her father married a “monstrous” woman who “would literally beat me black and blue.” Her stepmother also berated her and insisted no man would ever find her attractive. When the girl told her father what was going on, she says he did nothing.

As a young woman, she gravitated toward “terrible” relationships, because that's what she was used to. With counseling, she has come to realize the pattern: “When you go through horrible abuse, you push away good relationships. You don't allow yourself success,” she says.

She describes her first husband as a “raging” alcoholic and drug addict: “He would put a needle in his arm and inject just about anything, including alcohol.”

Bent on escaping him and making a better life for herself and her children, she enrolled in school. The program she chose led to a good job and the financial independence she needed. But not long before she graduated, she says her children experienced unspeakable trauma

that continued for years, trauma that inevitably affected her as well. (To reveal the details would be to risk exposing her identity.)

“This has been a lifetime of abuse,” she says—“one big, taxing trial.”

She divorced her husband and went on to other relationships and two more marriages. She had more children. She experimented with street drugs. She took psychology classes in hopes of understanding herself and the people around her.

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The SAFE hotline received 661 calls for help last year. Of those calls, 132 were from Orange County.

## Getting help

- If you're in immediate danger, call 911.
- For anonymous, confidential help, call SAFE's 24-hour crisis hotline at (800) 825-8876 or email [info@safejourneys.org](mailto:info@safejourneys.org).
- If you live outside SAFE's service area (Orange, Culpeper, Fauquier, Madison and Rappahannock counties), call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-7233 or (800) 787-3224 (TTY).

Services To Abused Families, Inc.

“When someone's house gets broken into, they're glad you're there. When it's a domestic violence crime, sometimes nobody wants you there, even though you were called there.”

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Office had been available to attend the May session in Staunton.

LaCasse said that, by law, he and other law enforcement officers are required to make an arrest if they respond to a domestic call and see evidence of an assault on a victim, such as marks on the person's neck, and can identify the attacker. If they don't have enough evidence for an arrest, he continued, they still can get an emergency protective order, lasting three days, for the victim. The protective order then can be extended if the victim requests it.

### "We'll stay late; we'll come in early"

Fitzgerald said she and her fellow prosecutors don't want to add further trauma to the lives of victims afraid to testify.

"What we're trying to do—hoping to do—is, as often as possible, help folks who have just been so beaten down by being dependent" on their abusers, she said.

She said that often starts with giving survivors of domestic violence a chance to talk about what they've been through. She said these women and men have essentially "lost their voice" in the process of being stalked, threatened and attacked, and she and her colleagues want them to know they can speak openly about their experiences without fear of reprisal.

"We'll stay late; we'll come in early; we'll work around people's work schedules because most people don't have the flexibility to come in during normal business hours to meet with us.

So we are trying to be as responsive as possible to when our victims are available, whatever circumstances under which they're available," she said.

### Resources available for victims of domestic violence

Her approach is to tell victims, in effect, "We're not going to rock your world. We're not going to rip you out of your home. But you know what, there are some resources you might want to think about."

This is where Ryane Wharton, victim advocate for the Victim/Witness Assistance Program in the Orange County Commonwealth's Attorney's Office, comes in, along with Services for Abused Families, Inc. (SAFE), a nonprofit agency serving Orange, Culpeper, Fauquier, Madison and Rappahannock counties.

Fitzgerald said Wharton often gets calls in the middle of the night from victims in need of guidance. Wharton can help them navigate the court system and put them in touch with SAFE, which can offer them shelter in a secure location if they feel endangered at home. SAFE also offers counseling and follow-up contact if survivors want it, and all of its services are free and confidential.

With allies lined up on their side early on, Fitzgerald noted, victims have begun "opening up much faster" and providing crucial information prosecutors can use to bolster their cases. She noted, however, that not all domestic-violence cases go to trial

and not all end up with convictions. She said that because judges are seeking "creative alternatives" to jail time, she sometimes requests a continuance with the proviso that a first-time offender agrees to attend an anger management class, in hopes this will resolve the problem.

### A bus ticket to safety

Cindy Hedges, executive director of SAFE, works with victims of domestic violence every day. SAFE serves these victims and their families in a variety of ways, including offering them shelter, counseling and follow-up services. Under appropriate circumstances, Hedges said, SAFE will provide survivors of domestic violence with bus or train tickets so they can move far away, without their abusers having any idea where they have gone.

A call to the SAFE hotline is often the first time a victim of domestic violence asks for help. The anonymous and confidential hotline number is (800) 825-8876. SAFE staff members do all they can to publicize this number, which is posted in social services offices and public libraries, among many other places.

According to Angela Abeijon, SAFE shelter and support services manager, the SAFE hotline received 661 calls for help last year. Of those calls, 132 were from Orange County.

Of the 71 Orange County residents whom SAFE staff met and assisted last year, 62 were women or girls and the others were men or boys. A total

of eight mothers and 12 children from Orange County took refuge in the SAFE house in 2018. (The location of this house is not shared publicly.)

### SAFE advice for survivors

Staying at the SAFE house isn't the only option for people on the run from abusive partners. Sometimes, an abused woman or man may not be able to leave home, at least not yet. In those cases, Hedges said, SAFE will help the person plan an escape and line up the resources necessary to make it succeed. This is where a bus or train ticket can be useful.

One piece of advice the 14-member SAFE staff consistently offers is very practical: Don't advertise your location. Hedges and Abeijon said abusers stalk their partners via phone apps, social media and online bank statements that pinpoint location. They tell people on the run from abusers to turn off location settings on their phones right away.

Helping people escape abusive intimate relationships and build new lives is demanding, stressful work, but Hedges and her colleagues are in it for the long game. They sit with many victims, female and male, who weep with fear and pain. But there have been plenty of SAFE success stories, as victims begin to see themselves as survivors and figure out new ways to live and thrive. Hedges said it is all worth it for the times she sits with survivors who have turned their lives around and cry "tears of joy."

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She got divorced a second time, and then a third. Last year, one of her ex-husbands threatened to hurt her.

"I believed him, and he scared me. I was in a very vulnerable situation. They took me in here," she says, nodding toward Hedges.

She and Hedges trade smiles when they talk about the "countless" calls it took before she showed up in person.

There was one week when she called several times, always early in the morning. She would say she was OK one day, not OK the next.

"Just come and talk to us, so we can work through this," Hedges urged her. Finally, she paid a visit.

"I was a train wreck," she says now.

To her amazement, SAFE offered her much more than a secure place to stay while she got her bearings and decided on her next move. She lived in the SAFE house for about a month, participated in the agency's group therapy sessions and talked at length to individual SAFE staff members, including Hedges.

Gentle in demeanor and careful never to shame anyone, Hedges nevertheless insists on being firm and direct.

"If you're self-sabotaging," she says, "I'll tell you."

Commenting on the woman she has gotten to know well over the past year, Hedges says, "She would get angry and tell me I didn't know what she was going through."

But as they became acquainted, the

woman saw that Hedges understood a lot. And the director of SAFE would not coddle her.

"She needed truth," Hedges says. "She doesn't do well with patronizing at all. There were days when I would just look at her and say, 'Nope, this is not the way it is. You're not doing it this way.'"

Glancing at Hedges, who has become a trusted friend, the woman says, "You were 200% right."

Through therapy and many conversations with SAFE staff, she says, "You get better at seeing red flags."

"You listen to that internal voice," Hedges puts in.

"If you don't listen to it," the woman adds, "you're going to end up in a bad situation. Listen to that internal voice, and you're going to be OK."

The two agree that a history of abuse can make it hard to recognize a dangerous person or a bad relationship. But that ability can be regained, if you're willing to trust your instincts and listen to your gut.

With the continuing support of the SAFE staff, the woman is determined to stay on track and focus on giving to others in need. Even though she recently lost a child to a drug overdose, she refuses to give up.

To others who are in abusive situations, she has a message: "You have to reach out; that's the biggest thing."

She says it's also important to know

that even after you escape an abusive situation, you won't feel OK, at least not anytime soon.

"Even though you aren't actively living in an abusive situation at the moment—say you're living alone, but you've been in this cycle for your entire life—you're still affected. It affects your career, your

job, your education, your emotions, your everything.

"You have to get counseling, therapy," she continues. "This program [at SAFE] was amazing for me. I wasn't even here that long, but it was long enough to get talked off the ledge enough times and then get strong."