

Access to Justice

The Domestic Violence Action Center

by Nanci Kreidman

Providing legal services to victims of domestic violence is one of the core functions of Domestic Violence Action Center (“the Center”) and what sets it apart from other organizations serving the community locally. The Center is anchored in the community to serve victims, educate professionals, participate in system reform efforts, and raise awareness about domestic violence, a complex social crime. The problem of family violence is widely recognized as a challenge facing the community. In Hawaii, over the past 25 years, many laws have been passed; new programs designed; funds raised for expanding services; training developed; and protocols and procedures established for intervening public and private agencies. The Center has been involved in most of these efforts.

Social norms largely condone the use of force, and society’s belief systems perpetuate the notion that in an intimate partnership there are gender roles and unequal power between women and men. Popular culture glorifies violence, and institutions too often look the other way.

The good news is that there is an increasing demand by victims and their families for assistance, which means that the community has learned that violence behind closed doors is no longer a private matter, but rather an issue of community concern. Every person deserves to live safely in his/her own

home.

The bad news is there are no signs that violence against intimate partners is abating.

There are many strategies we must use to provide safety, increase accountability, prevent the continuing use of abusive tactics against loved ones, and interrupt the cycle of violence that costs the community today — and in the future — millions of dollars. Employers, healthcare providers, neighbors, churches, prisons, schools, elected leaders, and families have an enduring need to invest in the prevention of harm, access to justice, and programs that promote safety and healing.

A study conducted by economists at Colgate University and the University of Arkansas concluded that access to legal services is a primary factor contributing to a nationwide decrease in domestic violence, eclipsing other services such as shelters, hotlines, and counseling programs. One of the economists who authored the study stated: “Legal services are the most expensive support service, the service to which the fewest women have access, and, according to our research, the only service that

decreases the likelihood women will be battered.”¹

It is the wisdom across the country that legal practitioners should have the benefit of education or training related to domestic violence. The issue comes up often in divorce, even when that is not the “presenting” problem. Many battered immigrant spouses seek immigration relief because of intimate partner violence. Similarly, intimate partner violence in juvenile, substance abuse, and child abuse cases compounds the complexity of the circumstances. Without sufficient understanding, the case strategy or approach to settlement and representation can be sorely lacking.

The Domestic Violence Action Center is a resource for information, support, and training. It can assist your clients with safety planning and consult with you on cases needing the expertise that it has developed.

¹ Amy Farmer and Jill Tiefenthaler, *Explaining the Recent Decline in Domestic Violence*, “Contemporary Economic Policy,” Vol. 21, No. 2, April 2008, pp. 158-172.

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