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Faith communities seek federal partnership to combat domestic violence

by Carol Zimmermann by Catholic News Service



One in four women has experienced domestic violence in her lifetime, according to surveys and data from the last decade. (CNS photo illustration/Greg Tarczynski)

WASHINGTON -- In desperation, women suffering from domestic violence often turn to faith communities for help.

These communities can offer vital support and connect women with services they need such as legal assistance and temporary housing. But the ability to do this well is not necessarily a given. Every leader of every faith community across the country will not automatically have the right response or the necessary information on hand to best help victims of domestic violence.

But the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition hopes to change that. The group, formed by Jewish Women International in 2008, is made up of more than 20 organizations, including the National Council of Catholic Women. It also represents Muslim, evangelical, Baha'i, United Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist and Presbyterian communities.

The group meets once a month to discuss and promote domestic violence legislation. These meetings have taken on a renewed urgency during October -- Domestic Violence Awareness Month -- since the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act is set to take place this year.

The federal legislation, which was passed in 1994, set out to improve criminal justice and community-based responses to domestic and dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. It also outlined grant programs to prevent violence against women, established a national domestic violence hotline and gave new protections to victims of domestic abuse. The act was reauthorized in 2000 and 2005.

During an Oct. 18 Capitol Hill news briefing on this legislation, sponsored by the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition, speakers stressed that the legislation's upcoming reauthorization should more clearly designate a federal partnership with local faith communities.

Speakers from a variety of faith traditions noted that religious groups are often first responders for abused women who don't know where to turn and these groups would significantly benefit from funding and training in how to best respond to these crisis situations.

Each speaker stressed the enormity of the problem of domestic abuse, citing the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's statistics that 85 percent of domestic violence victims are women and one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.

The Rev. Susan Newman, an associate pastoral minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, said abused women are "going to go to church" not only to seek refuge but to look for direction, illustrating the importance of clergy education so church leaders "know how to help people in these situations."

She recounted one example where a woman who sought the help of her faith community did not end up getting good advice. When the woman, who had been physically and emotionally abused by her husband, found out that her husband had also been sexually abusing his stepdaughter, she immediately sought the advice of a church leader. He in turn advised her to "go back home to your husband," citing the passage from Ephesians admonishing wives to be submissive to their husbands.

The U.S. Catholic bishops addressed that specific biblical passage in their 1992 document, "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women." The bishops condemned the use of the Bible to support abusive behavior in any form, stressing that men and women are created in God's image and should treat each other with dignity and respect.

The document, updated in 2002, says that "violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified" and that "no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage."

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At the briefing, Loribeth Weinstein, executive director of Jewish Women International, echoed the notion that religious leaders need to be trained and educated about domestic violence issues because they "serve as powerful role models who can connect women to social services."

Weinstein described the Violence Against Women Act as "landmark" legislation for acknowledging domestic violence as a crime and providing federal funds and resources to fight these crimes.

She said the reauthorized legislation could have an even broader reach if it connected with faith groups and made it easier for these groups to apply for funding. Currently, she said the provisions of the act are so confusing that many faith groups simply do not apply for funding.

Weinstein also said the reauthorized legislation should do more to address abuse of teens and college women as well as elder abuse.

"Domestic violence is an epidemic that doesn't spare anyone," she said. "It affects every race, religion and culture." And as such, she said, there needs to be a "holistic approach to stop violence against women."

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