

Jews Are Abused Too

Rabbis Asked to Silence Stereotypes

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"Domestic violence doesn't happen in Jewish communities..." "These are nice Jewish girls and boys..." "Jewish men make great husbands..."

Putting an end to these stereotypes is the goal of the new partnership between Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Journey to Safety, the domestic violence program of Jewish Family & Children's Service. They have teamed up on a campaign that addresses domestic abuse in the Jewish community of Greater Boston.

"There are a lot of stereotypes in our culture and I certainly grew up hearing that Jewish men are wonderful husbands. Well they are wonderful husbands, but some of them are abusive," said Alyson Morse Katzman, Associate Director of Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence, an interfaith organization that promotes hope and justice for victims and survivors of domestic violence and elder abuse.

In fact, there are many communities that don't want to admit that domestic violence is going on around them. "The Jewish community is not the only community that doesn't think domestic violence happens in their community," said Katzman. Many people in the Jewish community grow up with these pre-conceived notions in mind. "It's really dangerous to use stereotypes but sometimes you can't help but have that in the back of your head," Katzman added.

The groundbreaking work, made possible by The Miriam Fund, is expanding the circle of Jewish communities that recognize domestic abuse, know how to safely respond to victims, and have referral information for services and support.

Over the past seven years as Director of Journey to Safety, Elizabeth Schön Vainer has also consistently heard the myth that domestic violence and domestic abuse doesn't happen in the Jewish community. "Having leaders in the community speak up is one piece to the puzzle of breaking down that myth," said Vainer.

As part of this work, they are building a concerted Jewish community statement condemning domestic violence that will be published in December in a variety of online and print media. They have several rabbis who have already signed on and are hoping for a robust number of clergy to sign their names and attract the attention of other clergy. "But also the community will see the statement. If our faith leaders say that domestic violence is not acceptable, they are breaking the silence about domestic violence," said Katzman.

Because people aren't talking about domestic violence in their communities or amongst each other, a victim will likely feel even



Alyson Morse Katzman

more isolated. "She may feel like she's the only one this has ever happened to, or she feels like she can't talk about it to anyone," said Katzman. However, if the clergy signs a statement condemning domestic violence, these victims will know that their faith community is talking about it and may encourage them to seek help. "Whether it's going to a clergy person or going to a domestic violence service provider like Journey to Safety," added Katzman.

They campaign is titled "Many Voices, One Message: Jewish Clergy Unite Against Domestic Violence." Jewish clergy across the state will be given the opportunity to sign on to the campaign, which will appear online and in print. The statement is: "We join together in saying we will not tolerate domestic abuse in the Jewish community." The campaign is adapted from the very successful Project S.A.R.A.H. campaign in New Jersey.

"When you see all those names, you think about what domestic abuse is," said Vainer. Particularly when abuse happens over years, it is all about isolation. The victim could be isolated from family, friends, their congregation, or simply the pain they suffer from can make them feel utterly alone. "Their abuser might be a very charismatic, popular person and the abuse is very specific to their home so that they feel very, very alone," said Vainer. The women believe that when victims see these names, it may provide encouragement for them to think about reaching out to one of the rabbis or their own if they have signed on to the campaign.

"We haven't done anything like this," said Katzman. Safe Havens has been working in many faith communities, but never had the opportunity to bring an entire faith to make a statement against domestic violence. If their efforts are successful in the Jewish community, there is more opportunity for the organizations to get victims the help they need. "It's really a win-win. The most important people who are going to get something out of this are the victims and the survivors, but how great is it that our community is going to unite on this and say, 'No, we're not going to stand for it,'" asked Katzman.

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— Alyson Morse Katzman