

Jews, non-Jews find help from domestic abuse

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While football player Ray Rice is making the headlines for knocking his then-fiancée unconscious, most often, domestic abuse does not play out as publicly.

“It’s not always as obvious as a video of someone being hit in an elevator,” said Elizabeth Schön Vainer, the director of Journey to Safety, a program of Jewish Family & Children’s Services (JF&CS).

In the Jewish community, as in many others, the challenge is often getting victims of domestic abuse to come forward and ask for help and Journey to Safety is dedicated not only to helping domestic abuse survivors, but also preventing abuse by spreading awareness in the community. As part of that outreach, the program has distributed its posters with information on domestic abuse to about 65 synagogues in the area. The staff of Journey to Safety also speak at synagogues about learning to recognize signs of abuse.

The stigma that this issue carries and the myth that “these things don’t happen” in Jewish families, is very strong, said Schön Vainer. According to the program’s website, domestic abuse occurs in Jewish families at about the same rate as it does in families of other religions (15-25 percent). However, Jewish women stay longer in abusive relationships - seven to 15 years versus three to five years, according to studies.

The only program in New England for helping Jewish victims of domestic abuse, it is also the only such program in the region for Russian speakers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. And although about 40 percent of the program’s clients are Jews, Journey to Safety is also designed to help victims of all faiths and backgrounds. At any given time, the program works with about 30-50 people.

The program also helps men, those who are in both same-sex and heterosexual relationships. “Disproportionately, it is true that women are the victims,” Schön Vainer said, “but ... for men, there is even more stigma to overcome.” She added that partner, domestic and dating abuse in same-sex relationships occurs at the same rate as in straight partnerships.

The Jewish Domestic Violence Coalition was created in 1994 by a group of grassroots activists, whose efforts eventually led to the launch of Journey to Safety six years later. While there are many similar programs in the area, Journey to Safety responds to the needs that are unique to the Jewish community. “[We] offer expertise and understanding,” to Jews of all observance levels and denominations, Schön Vainer said.

Journey to Safety offers counseling to survivors of domestic abuse and refers them to other programs within JF&CS, such as Family Table, the kosher food pantry. The program's staffers also accompany its clients to court, which include civil, criminal, and rabbinic. "A lot of our clients... appreciate having someone like our advocate who can be there [in court] with them," Schön Vainer said. "We understand the system and help people [with] the process."

TeenSafe, a program within Journey to Safety is designed specifically for helping teenagers recognize deal with dating abuse. In the program's workshops, teens also learn how to respond if they see someone in their lives suffer from abuse. "So much of what happens in peer relationships among kids, they keep to themselves," Schön Vainer said, "they don't share it with adults. We really want to help girls feel empowered."

Schön Vainer noted that domestic abuse is not only rarely as obvious as a video that catches the abuser in the act of physical violence, it also happens over time. Very often, domestic abuse occurs in a form of a controlling relationship, she said, "and the control can look very different. It's not just physical control, but there's something about that controlling behavior that instills fear and shame."

In fact, survivors of abuse who come to Journey to Safety often say that they have never been hit, but rather experienced instances of their abusers throwing things, slamming doors or punching a wall during a heated argument. Schön Vainer emphasized that this behavior as well as verbal threats to harm and intimidation, constitute domestic abuse.

When a victim reaches out to Journey to Safety, she said the staff does not anticipate what the victim will decide. "If I were to give a message to somebody out there," Schön Vainer said, "is that we don't have any expectations of what will happen, [but] we talk to them and figure out how they can be safer."

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