

Rabbis urged to unite against domestic abuse

By Sara Brown

Advocate staff

BOSTON – Just in time for Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a pair of service agencies are working to bust the myth that Jewish households do not experience domestic violence.

Journey to Safety, the domestic violence prevention program of Jewish Family & Children's Service, and Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership against Domestic Violence are teaming up to address domestic abuse in the Jewish community of Greater Boston.

"We are reaching out to rabbis and Jewish leaders to educate them on the issues of domestic violence," said Alyson Morse Katzman, Safe Havens associate director. "We want them to know that abuse isn't just physical."

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Safe Havens is an interdenominational organization that believes faith communities have a unique role to play in responding to and preventing domestic abuse and elder abuse.

The agencies are working to craft a statement against domestic abuse – "Many Voices, One Message: Jewish Clergy Unite against Domestic Abuse" – for rabbis that lead congregations to sign. Safe Havens will invite Jewish clergy across Massachusetts to join in raising awareness about domestic abuse. After the holidays, clergy will be invited to sign on to the campaign, which will be published in December.

Katzman hopes the campaign will erase the stigma associated with discussing domestic abuse.

"If people get the message from

their religious leaders that this is not something we talk about," she said, "they may not pursue getting help or letting people know what's going on."

"To stand out in front of the community and speak out against domestic violence is so important to survivors [of abuse]," said Elizabeth Schön Vainer of Journey to Safety. "It can be very isolating. Sometimes the only place they are allowed to go is to a service. You can never speak out enough. It takes a lot for people to share what's going on with them. The more a victim hears this is not OK, the more they may be willing to speak up."

The agencies also want congregational leaders to know they need not to be experts in domestic abuse, and can use the agencies' services for help.

"When we spoke to rabbis, they all knew about Journey to Safety, which is great," Vainer said. "However, they thought they could only call us and send a victim there. They can also call us and just ask questions and get advice. They don't need to go it alone."

Stereotypes about Jewish culture are often another reason why victims fail to seek help.

"We live with stereotypes about our cultures," said Julie Youdovin of Journey to Safety. "You hear about 'nice Jewish boys and girls.' People don't realize this happens to other Jews. They think if it's happening to them, [they feel] they must be doing something wrong."

The Miriam Fund is sponsoring the initiative, which aims to expand the circle of Jewish communities that recognize domestic abuse,

know how to respond safely to victims, and can offer referral information for services and support.

"One-in-four women will be abused in her lifetime," Katzman said. "Of course, some of those women are going to be Jewish. Abuse doesn't exclude the Jewish community."

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**– Alyson Morse
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Safe Havens**