



The comprehensive resource on domestic violence

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State coalition calls for “courageous leadership” with release of 12-month review of Ohio’s Domestic Violence Fatalities

(COLUMBUS) – “He’s in here killing us!” This was the cry of a young girl who was fatally stabbed alongside her mother and sister in Columbus, the victim of an action colder than that January morning. “She did everything she was supposed to do,” were the reflections of a detective investigating a homicide/suicide in North Ridgeville in Lorain County. “Ugh, I feel so vulnerable right now,” was the foreboding message in a final text from a woman shot by her estranged husband in a homicide/suicide in Hudson in Summit County. These haunting words only begin to tell the story of Ohio’s domestic violence homicides, sixty-nine cases captured in twelve months of media reports reviewed by the Ohio Domestic Violence Network (ODVN).

“Each year during October, ODVN asks the public to join us in observing Domestic Violence Awareness Month,” explains Jo Simonsen, a director at ODVN and a member of the organization’s Communications Team, which developed the project. “In the immediate lead-up to our awareness month events last year, as we were preparing to honor outstanding state leadership on the issue, we were also fielding requests from the media to comment on growing public outcry on tragedies occurring simultaneously in our communities. The media, our citizens and public officials were clamoring to better understand how this happens. So, with the limited resources of our Communications Team, a committed volunteer and the support of Ohio’s domestic violence programs across the state, we figured we would start small by doing a simple media study. In retrospect, it was neither small nor simple,” notes Simonsen.

“It is the most heartbreaking work,” Simonsen continues. “Each case is unique, except for the common devastation this violence wreaks on families and communities. Reading the media reports on each case, we come to know who was left behind, who tried to help and how incredibly vicious domestic violence perpetrators are at their most extreme.” ODVN’s Communications Team, along with volunteer Karen Salerno, pored over reports of homicides occurring between July 1, 2015 and June 30, 2016, captured through Google Alerts or forwarded by ODVN’s member programs. “Of the 79 cases we initially reviewed, we found 69 that we believe had some clear relationship to domestic violence, two of those in same sex relationships” she adds. In those sixty-nine cases, the team counted 101 fatalities, which included 90 adults and 11 children.

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As part of this year's Domestic Violence Awareness Month efforts, the organization is releasing its summary of statistics gleaned from the reports. The review found that 94% of the cases were perpetrated by males. Forty-three of the sixty-nine cases involved a single death, and twenty-six cases, or over one-third of cases, involved multiple deaths, one of which included four deaths at the incident. Once thought to be "a private family matter," the study found that domestic violence murders occurred in homes, workplaces, roadways and parking lots and commonly involved bystanders, acquaintances and first responders among the injured or dead. Children were reported to be present at the scene in one-quarter of the fatal incidents.

Twenty-two cases were either homicide/suicides or attempted homicide/suicides with a surviving party. All homicide/suicides were perpetrated by males; the homicide victims in 15 of 17 completed homicide/suicides were female. Simonsen suggests that additional cases might be classified as "suicide-by-cop." Thirty percent of all sixty-nine fatality cases involved the suicide of the perpetrator, and in ninety-four percent of those cases a gun was used.

Guns were used in seventy-four percent of fatal incidents, and shootings were by far the most common cause of death, leading to seventy of the 101 fatalities. An additional ten other individuals, including a seven-year-old boy, were shot but survived. The gun statistics exclude the eight times law enforcement killed perpetrators at the scenes. Two law enforcement officers died in cases related to domestic violence, and two were shot but survived. Other causes of death at fatal incidents were stabbings, strangulation, and blunt force trauma.

"Of course we are saddened for the children who lost their lives or lost their parents in these cases. We are saddened for the mother in Toledo who survived, but lost her son and daughter to a dating violence homicide. We are sad for the twelve-year-old child who intervened to kill his mother's abuser," Simonsen adds. Several reports captured stories of hero family members or acquaintances that killed the suspect, lost their own lives or sustained serious injuries in order to protect or defend victims. "Having worked in the field for twenty-five years, I am no stranger to the fact that people die from domestic violence. All of us on our team are seasoned professionals, and still we are each deeply moved with every new case." Unfortunately new cases seem to arrive weekly and will be collected for another twelve months.

ODVN hopes that the data will support survivors and families of victims, as well as domestic violence programs and the public, in demanding more from leaders to address domestic violence. Nancy Neylon, ODVN's Executive Director, comments, "ODVN will be working with legislators, domestic violence programs, public officials and others to design more effective responses that can prevent these tragedies. We ask the public to remember these losses, to strive to fully understand the issues, and to support advances toward long-term solutions. We must insist that Ohio deliver courageous and outstanding leadership on domestic violence."

Such leadership will be honored during the public observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month on Tuesday morning with a gathering in the statehouse atrium in Columbus.

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Representatives from the offices of US Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Ohio Senator Kevin Bacon (R-Minerva) and Ohio Governor John Kasich (R) will be in attendance. In addition to a press conference releasing a summary of the Ohio Domestic Violence Fatalities media reports, and the reading of customary proclamations, ODVN will honor two women with the 2016 Croucher Family Award for Outstanding Leadership. Honoree Debra Seltzer has been leading efforts to end violence against women her entire career since graduating from Oberlin College in 1984. She currently serves as the Program Administrator for the Ohio Department of Health Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Prevention Program. In addition to developing public health policy and administering federal grants aimed at prevention education, she works in collaboration with statewide prevention efforts, including the Ohio Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence Consortium, and she chairs the Barbara Warner Committee on Workplace Violence, implementing Governor Kasich's executive order to provide domestic violence training and resources to all State of Ohio employees.

Seltzer's co-honoree, Pamela Hayman-Weaner, has been an attorney with Legal Services of Northwest Ohio; Advocates for Basic Legal Equality since 1991. She led the efforts to establish a Defiance County Domestic Violence Task Force, writing and implementing policies for a coordinated community response to domestic violence that continue to this day and have expanded to communities around Ohio. Regarded by her peers in the field as a visionary, Hayman-Weaner was instrumental in bringing the concept of a Family Justice Center to Ohio when the project she led in Northwest Ohio was selected by the US Department of Justice as a model pilot site, the first multi-site rural county center in the nation. In addition to the namesake Croucher family, Seltzer and Hayman-Weaner join five other honorees to receive the award from the Ohio Domestic Violence Network.

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The Ohio Domestic Violence Network is Ohio's leading voice for domestic violence survivors and their allies. ODVN was founded in 1989 to ensure the elimination of domestic violence and serves as a critical source for professional training, resources, public education, and policy advocacy to survivors, domestic violence agencies, the justice system, the health care system, governmental agencies, and other organizations.

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