

<https://www.cleveland.com/coronavirus/2021/02/amid-the-coronavirus-pandemic-calls-to-domestic-violence-hotlines-are-more-complex-and-more-frightening-coping-through-covid.html>

Coronavirus

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, calls to domestic violence hotlines are more complex -- and more frightening: Coping Through COVID

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A survivor of domestic violence is seen at a safe house in Nevada County, Calif. in this 2010 file photo. Half of Ohio's domestic violence shelters reported an increase in requests for service in 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic, according to the Ohio Domestic Violence Network. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli) ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Evan MacDonald, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio – The calls to Ohio's domestic violence hotlines have changed dramatically since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Survivors are spending more time on the line, describing issues that are complicated by isolation and logistical matters related to COVID-19. And their accounts are more frightening, involving escalating levels of violence as they've been sheltering with abusers.

"Survivors are describing situations that are more complicated. They're describing situations that are more

lethal,” said Mary O’Doherty, the executive director of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network in Columbus. “It really does seem scarier from the perspective of the folks who are handling those hotline calls.”

The pandemic has created a “perfect storm” of risk factors for domestic violence, experts said. Job losses and uncertainty over evictions has led to more financial insecurity. Parents are under more stress at home due to the closures of schools and day cares. And more people are using alcohol to cope, as [liquor sales have spiked during the pandemic](#).

More than half of Ohio’s domestic violence programs reported an increase in the number of people seeking shelter, calling hotlines or requesting services in 2020, according to a survey the ODVN conducted last month. Some reported nearly triple the number of people requesting services. And 58% of the state’s domestic violence programs reported more severe injuries, including a notable rise in strangulations.

The ongoing cleveland.com series “[Coping Through COVID](#)” aims to help Northeast Ohio residents manage the stress of COVID-19 by examining the mental-health and behavioral-health aspects of the pandemic. The series tells individuals’ stories and explores various challenges and strategies with experts.

Do you need to contact domestic violence services? See the bottom of this post for a list of agencies that can help.

The isolation that’s intended to limit the spread of the virus has left many confined at home with abusers, experts said. Abusers are using the pandemic to control partners by threatening to kick them out if they go to work and bring the virus back into the home. They’re also monitoring social media use and phone calls, further isolating survivors from friends and family members, said Melissa Graves, the CEO of the Journey Center for Safety and Healing in Cleveland (formerly the Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center).

“In a COVID environment, in this world where so much is out of people’s control, abusers do tend to try to exert control where they can. And it often ends up in increased abuse,” Graves said.

Calls to domestic violence hotlines have increased from an average of 22 minutes to closer to 45 during the pandemic, said Terri Heckman, the executive director of the Battered Women’s Shelter and Rape Crisis Center of Medina and Summit Counties. Survivors who are thinking of leaving abusive relationships suddenly have more to consider, such as whether they can access the internet at a shelter for remote work.

“Every single client talks about the COVID impact before they talk about the actual abuse that happened,” Heckman said.

Domestic violence is frequently underreported, and experts believe the pandemic has exacerbated the issue. Calls to Ohio’s domestic violence hotlines [decreased early in the crisis](#), as many survivors struggled to find a safe time to call while they were isolated with an abuser during Ohio’s stay-at-home order. For those reasons, the true impact of the pandemic may not be apparent for some time.

“I don’t think we’re going to know, for a couple years, exactly what has happened during this time,” Heckman said.

Isolated at home

Before the pandemic, survivors often turned up at shelters with a story of how they packed a bag and left while an abuser was at work. But it became harder to escape an abusive situation when the abuser was always home.

The Journey Center used to get 80% of its calls from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., when either the survivor or the abuser was at work. The pandemic forced survivors to find other times when they were safe to make a call, Graves said.

“Our calls we suddenly coming in the middle of the night, when the abuser was sleeping,” she said.

Those challenges led to a decrease in calls to domestic hotlines early in the pandemic. The Journey Center typically receives about 450 calls per month, but that dropped to 350 during the stay-at-home order, Graves said. Calls to the Battered Women’s Shelter dropped by roughly 60%, Heckman said.

Survivors are finding it harder to take some of the “mini steps” that could lead to them deciding to leave, such as visiting a family member for a heart-to-heart or attending a support group meeting, experts said.

As a result, fewer survivors are turning up at residential shelters to ask for help. Before the pandemic, three-quarters of the survivors who came to the Battered Women’s Shelter walked in themselves. Now the shelter is getting the “worst of the worst,” the survivors who end up hospitalized with serious injuries or whose abuser has been arrested, Heckman said.

Part of the reason that’s happening is because survivors are weighing the risk of staying in an abusive home versus the uncertainty of the pandemic, experts said. But they never expected the isolation to last almost a full year.

“Unfortunately, we’re going to hear about domestic violence victims who said to themselves ‘as soon as this is over, I’m leaving,’ never thinking this would stretch out as long as it has,” Heckman said.

Keeping shelters safe

Domestic violence services faced scores of new challenges the moment the pandemic arrived in Ohio. The first order of business was making sure the public knew that shelters were still open.

O’Doherty said the ODVN was “very concerned” the public might think shelters were forced to close, so they used social media and online newsletters to communicate the latest information. Graves said the Journey Center left pamphlets and other information in spots like grocery stores and pharmacies.

Shelters also needed to adapt to ensure that survivors weren’t in danger of contracting COVID-19 at those safe havens. That required some social distancing measures, which limited the number of survivors they could help at one time.

“When the social distancing requirements went into place, many of our shelters had to reduce the number they could serve, because they had to spread out,” O’Doherty said.

The ODVN used money from the federal CARES Act, the \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief package, to set up a program that pays for hotel rooms for additional space. Since April 1, the ODVN has paid given money to 34 shelters to put 262 survivors in hotel rooms, O’Doherty said.

Shelters and other domestic violence services also invested CARES Act money in telehealth, allowing survivors to speak to counselors from home. But that solution hasn’t been perfect for survivors who are still living with an abuser and weighing whether to leave. Shelters like the Journey Center are still letting survivors come in for counseling if they don’t have a safe place to attend virtually.

Telehealth hasn't been an ideal solution for the counselors, either. It was helpful to avoid a commute to and from work, which often allowed them to schedule an extra counseling session each day. But they struggled with the isolation they were living through, too. They missed having a coworker to speak with after a difficult session, Heckman said.

"They need the interaction of another therapist after a tough call," she said. "They long for the support."

What will be the impact?

Because the true impact of the pandemic is unclear, it's difficult to say whether there will be an increased need for domestic violence services once it's under control, experts said. But several factors could make a potential surge more difficult to address.

Domestic violence services are already facing budget crunches due to [continued cuts to programs funded through the Victims of Crime Act](#), the federal program that provides money for therapy and other services. O'Doherty said the ODVN's member programs are losing roughly \$7.7 million for the next fiscal year, and have seen budget reductions of nearly 40% over the past two years.

"Our programs have been cutting their staffs and cutting their services over the last few years to deal with these cuts," O'Doherty said. "So we're not in a good position to deal with what comes next."

The state of Ohio also devotes far less of its general fund to domestic violence programs than neighboring states, according to an analysis of state budgets compiled by the ODVN. Ohio spends roughly nine cents per capita on those services. That pales in comparison to the \$1.50 per capita spent in Kentucky and West Virginia, \$1.49 in Pennsylvania and \$1 in Michigan, according to the data.

The ODVN is asking Ohio to increase funding from \$1 million to \$5 million per year as part of the next state budget, O'Doherty said.

What can we do to help?

For the time being, experts said it's critical to look out signs of someone experiencing domestic violence during the pandemic. Heckman pointed to a story from Florida, where a [Walt Disney World ticket booker](#) heard someone yelling "get off of me" during a phone call. The ticket booker asked a few questions, then called law enforcement when the woman indicated she needed help.

During another recent incident, a [Florida waitress noticed bruises on a young boy](#). She flashed him a note to ask whether he needed help, which led to his parents being arrested on child abuse charges.

Graves suggested checking in on someone if you think they're in an abusive situation, because abusers often manipulate survivors into feeling isolated. But try to avoid being blunt and don't criticize their choices, because every situation is complex, she said.

"Just call to check in. Let them know you're thinking about them, and you're there for them if they need anything," Graves said. "That minimizes the isolation they're feeling."

Are you, a family member or a friend in crisis? Here's a list of agencies that can help.

Ohio Domestic Violence Network: Call 1-800-934-9840 or <https://www.odvn.org/find-help/>

Cuyahoga County Domestic Violence Help Line: Call 216-391-4357

National Domestic Violence Hotline: Call 1-800-799-7233 or <https://www.thehotline.org/>

Journey Center for Safety and Healing: Call 216-229-2420 or <https://www.journeyneo.org/>

Battered Women's Shelter of Summit and Medina Counties: Call 330-374-1111 (Summit) or 330-723-3900 (Medina) or <https://hopeandhealingresources.org/>