

Proposals take aim at domestic violence
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SOUTH BEND -- The findings were no secret to a veteran judge who has handled domestic violence cases in St. Joseph County.

But the findings released Tuesday by the YWCA's CourtWatch project triggered a list of recommendations intended to cut to the core of a problem that, too many times, ends in death.

"Our goal is to put ourself out of business," said Patricia Hancock, president of the Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team.

Using a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice that helped pay for a special courtroom sound system, the YWCA's CourtWatch project monitored the handling of 761 domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse cases in St. Joseph County for two years.

Sitting in on court cases from July 2010 to July 2011, CourtWatch team members compiled statistical analyses and formulated a list of recommendations for perpetrators and victims, and law enforcement, prosecutors and judges.

Constant monitoring of domestic violence cases led to a series of recommendations being based on the five "lethality indicators" for Domestic violence homicides reported by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Those indicators showed:

-- If an abuser threatened to injure or kill the victim, the risk of a homicide increased 15 times.

-- If the abuser used or threatened to use a weapon, the risk of fatality increased 20 times.

-- Attempted strangulation increased the risk of fatality by nearly 10 times.

-- Forcing the victim to have sex increased the fatality risk by more than 7 times.

-- Constant jealousy within the relationship increased the risk of death by more than 9 times.

"We are very aware of the fact that in St. Joseph County, we're averaging about four domestic homicides a year," said Linda Baechle, president and CEO of YWCA Northwest Indiana.

The numbers were old news to St. Joseph Circuit Court Judge Michael Gotsch, who admitted to being "long in the tooth" overseeing domestic violence cases since 2004.

"What we see from this whole process is that we're trying to move a volume of cases in a very difficult area," Gotsch said. "This is one of the most serious matters that we have because of the high percentage of cases that can get into serious injury, or death."

The team's recommendations stressed education activities in schools, education through media, and changes in government agency practice targeting employers' awareness of drug abuse in the workplace.

Other recommendations focused on hospital workers using the initial screening to ask whether a patient or family member is a victim of domestic violence; and assisting local emergency rooms and hospitals to provide safety for victims and family members while seeking medical care.

"We need to educate folks early, so we can provide some kind of domestic violence intervention programs in our schools," said Hancock.

"It is the objective of the (Domestic Violence) Fatality Review Team to transform the gravest act of domestic violence into real change, and bring hope to the families in our community."

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