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Domestic abuse role reversal

By John Simerman
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The way David Woods describes it, what started with a few hard swats turned more violent over the years -- to a few swings with a softball bat, a bottle of Jack Daniels cracked over the head, a peppermill to the face, a shotgun barrel pointed under the chin.

At one point his wife, Ruth Woods, couldn't take it anymore. So she called 9-1-1 -- on herself. When police arrived, they wrestled her husband to the ground.

"It took our daughter to say, 'No, it's not my daddy. It's Momma,'" said Ruth Woods, who no longer beats her husband.

In 2003, around the time she kneed him "16 or 17 times" in the groin, he again called a Sacramento-area domestic violence agency for help, he said, but was turned away.

"They said women are not perpetrators of domestic violence. Women are victims," said the former Marine and bar bouncer who is hobbled by back and circulation problems. "They have programs where they will help women get into housing they can afford. That's all I wanted."

Seeking equality

Now, Woods is suing the agency and the state, claiming state grant programs that fund shelters and other domestic violence services -- and the definition of domestic violence in the state health code -- discriminate against men.

Men's rights advocates also are attacking a bill in the state Assembly that would broaden a domestic violence grant program to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender victims, but not straight men.

The bid for equal services comes as a growing body of research suggests that men fall prey to domestic violence in significant numbers -- though they suffer injury less often.

Gender statistics

According to surveys cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 835,000 men are sexually or physically assaulted by an intimate partner every year in the United States, compared with 1.5 million women.

Crime data shows a greater imbalance, though domestic violence experts say it is probably skewed because men are less likely to report being victims.

Women accounted for 85 percent of the victims of "intimate partner violence" in 2001, a federal crime study shows. In California, four of five people arrested for spousal abuse in 2004 were male, and 85 percent of the 163 victims of homicide involving domestic violence were female.

Domestic violence reports from Contra Costa County show that 83 percent of alleged perpetrators last year were male, and 17 percent were women, although it is unclear how many were same-sex crimes.

Lack of services

What rankles advocates is the lack of shelters and other services directed at men; state funds support nearly 100 different shelter agencies, but there is just one domestic violence shelter for men in California, in Lancaster. More often, they say, local agencies refer men to homeless shelters or turn them away.

"They wind up sleeping in cars with their kids," said Michael Robinson, who is lobbying for changes in the law. "We need to address domestic violence truthfully: Guess what folks, there's women abusers and male abusers."

Currently, the bulk of funding for domestic violence is directed at female victims through programs under the state Office of Emergency Services and the Department of Health Services. Those two agencies provided a combined \$35 million last year to programs and shelter agencies.

The \$21 million granted through DHS, which helped fund 94 shelter agencies last year, specifically goes to female victims under the Battered Women Protection Act of 1994, said Michelle Mussuto, an agency spokeswoman. The OES funding does not specify a gender.

The state law that governs the DHS grant program defines domestic violence as "the infliction or threat of physical harm against past or present adult or adolescent female intimate partners and shall include physical, sexual and psychological abuse against the woman."

Updating the law

A bill by state Assemblywoman Rebecca Cohn, D-Campbell, would expand that program for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender victims. It would leave the definition of domestic violence intact.

The concern among some women's advocates is that making the definition of domestic violence neutral could force shelters to accept male victims - which many domestic violence specialists consider impractical or harmful.

"Of course we want all victims of domestic violence to be served," said Beth McGovern, legislative coordinator for the California Commission on the Status of Women. "What's really needed is more funding, or in at least some situations separate shelters. It would be wonderful if it would be addressed down the road."

Nationwide problem

A similar debate led to changes this year in the federal Violence Against Women Act. Among the changes are a required study of domestic violence and available services for male, female, youth and child victims as well as a provision that nothing in the law prohibits male victims from receiving services.

Gloria Sandoval, executive director of STAND! Against Domestic Violence, which serves Contra Costa County, said it can be dangerous to "gender-neutralize" the issue.

"Most domestic violence agencies will acknowledge that there are male victims, but that is a different issue than saying domestic violence is gender neutral," she said. "It is important to recognize that the majority of domestic violence incidences by far are against women," she said. "To make the funding criteria neutral would take away that recognition."

The agency, which is partially funded by the state and Contra Costa County, offers crisis line and counseling services to male victims, works with local homeless shelters and provides hotel vouchers for men who need it, said Sandoval.

Just 47 out of more than 2,000 calls last year to the crisis line came from males.

Agency speaks back

Women Escaping a Violent Environment, the Sacramento agency that David Woods said he called, received more than 2,000 calls from men last year, about 10 percent of the total, said Nicolette Bautista, the agency's executive director.

Bautista would not comment on the lawsuit but said the agency has a policy to provide services to all victims of domestic violence. It has shelter space only for women.

"It's becoming less taboo for male victims to come forward," she said, "and there certainly is a need to provide similar services to them."

There could be a legal need as well. Herma Hill Kay, a Boalt Hall law professor who specializes in anti-discrimination law, said federal court decisions and state law suggest that excluding male victims from funding may violate the law.

"Equal protection under the law sounds like a cliché," said David Woods, who claims he was denied a restraining order against his wife and mocked by police when he reported being hit. "But wouldn't it be nice for someone who never got it."

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