

Rainbow House adds another resource

High Risk Teams assess DV situations, provide help

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MARINETTE — Rainbow House Domestic Abuse Services of Marinette and Oconto counties continues to be at the cutting edge of technology and programming to better assist its clients.

Both counties have High Risk Teams, which meet once a month to scrutinize high-risk cases and determine the best course of action for victims. Milwaukee County is the only other county in Wisconsin to have a High Risk Team.

Courtney Olson, the executive director for the Rainbow House Domestic Abuse Shelter, became aware of a High Risk Team at the Sojourner Family Peace Center, a domestic abuse treatment center in downtown Milwaukee. At the time (2018), it was the only active team in the state.

Olson said she sat in on the team's weekly meetings from May through December of 2018. She soaked up knowledge.

"I began by monitoring and observing the Milwaukee team," she said. "I wanted to see what worked, how the team collaborated, what they could and couldn't talk about. I wanted to really try to figure out what that would be like for a rural model."

Olson said she shared her knowledge with Rainbow House lead advocate Jessica Honish. "We felt very strongly that this was something we needed to implement in the community," she said.

Together, they began contacting partner agencies late last year to determine interest. They got "resounding support" and by February of 2019, the teams were meeting in both counties.

ASSESSING A HIGH RISK CASE

Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, of John Hopkins University of Baltimore, conducted a national study involving 4,000 cases of intimate partner homicide. From that she came up with a Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP), a series of 11 statistically-validated questions to determine how much risk an individual is in.

Olson explained that law enforcement officers use these questions when called to a domestic violence situation.

She said if the victim answers yes to one of the first three questions, it automatically triggers the protocol of the officer contacting the Rainbow House.

Those questions are:

■ 1. Has he/she ever used a weapon against you or threatened you with a weapon?

■ 2. Has he/she threatened to kill you or your children?

■ 3. Do you think he/she might try to kill you?

If the victim answers yes to four or more of the remaining seven questions, that also triggers protocol calling Rainbow House.

Those questions are:

■ 4. Does he/she have a gun or can he/she get one easily?

■ 5. Has he/she ever tried to choke you?

■ 6. Is he/she violently or constantly jealous or does he/she

control most of your daily activities?

■ 7. Have you left him/her or separated after living together or being married?

■ 8. Is he/she unemployed?

■ 9. Has he/she ever tried to kill himself/herself?

■ 10. Do you have a child that he/she knows is not his/hers?

■ 11. Does he/she follow or spy on you or leave threatening messages?

"Sometimes a victim doesn't necessarily feel comfortable or they choose not to answer the questions," Olson said. "So there is an opportunity based on the belief of the officer that they may screen in."

In other words, an officer can use his or her own judgment if the victim appears to be in more danger than he/she is saying.

Olson said the officer calls the Rainbow House while the victim is right there with them. She said they to keep the initial phone call relatively short, but offer services and make arrangements if the victim wants to come into the shelter.

Olson said Campbell's case study attempted to obtain common factors in intimate partner homicides.

She said the study showed that more than 40 percent of victims had called law enforcement in the year prior to the homicide, but fewer than 5 percent had actually made contact with their local domestic violence shelter to engage in safety planning, to seek services, to get legal advocacy or any other resource offered by the shelter.

"So we believe that gap is where we have a huge potential to have an impact," Olson said. "We're really trying to make an effort through this lethality assessment tool to connect with every person who is reporting to law enforcement at the time of the incident."

THE TEAMS

As mentioned, Marinette and Oconto counties both have High Risk Teams. Olson and Honish are on both teams.

Others on the Marinette County team include: Craig Kasten, a detective with the Marinette County Sheriff's Department; Tom Conley, a detective with the Marinette Police Department; Mary Falkenberg, the county's victim witness coordinator; Julie Krause, probation and parole; and Joette Koronkiewicz, a legal advocate at Rainbow House.

The Oconto County team also includes: Keith Johnson, Oconto County Sheriff's Office; Barbara Cook, the county's victim witness coordinator; Marissa Poverski, probation and parole; and Mike Rehberg, Oconto Police Chief.

At the monthly meetings, the teams walk through all of the lethality assessment protocols that have been received by Rainbow House in the prior month. In order for a case to be discussed by the team, a victim must sign a release to share information with the team.

Olson said most victims sign the release.

"They want that greater level of



Special to the EagleHerald

The Marinette County High Risk Team conducts business earlier this month. The team reviews domestic violence calls from the previous month and determines the level of risk for a victim and possible courses of action. Pictured from left, Dawn Ragen, Marinette Probation and Parole; Jessica Honish, lead advocate; Mary Falkenberg, the county's victim witness coordinator, Courtney Olson, executive director and Joette Koronkiewicz, outreach/legal advocate. Not pictured are team members Craig Kasten, Marinette County Sheriff's Office, and Tom Conley, Marinette Police Department

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Courtney Olson

Rainbow House Domestic Abuse Services executive director

expertise in handling their situation," she said. "But if they don't want to (sign the release), that's fine. Then we can just share what's available through the public record."

Every member of the team is vital. Probation and parole checks to see if the perpetrator is on supervision. The district attorney's office shares what charges have been made. Law enforcement walks through the police reports and what happened at the incident.

Based on that, Rainbow House has a lot more information in terms of what resources the victim might need or what they might be experiencing in their home.

"I think the most important thing is the degree to which we've been able to connect with people who are in high-risk situations," Olson said. "We're doing things such as helping them with changing their locks or installing security cameras, providing them smart phones with minutes, whatever it is that that person identifies as a need. We're actually able to go out to their home and help assess the safety there."

Olson said this year, for the first time, Rainbow House advocates are fitted with body armor for when they go on home visits. Those visits are normally done in conjunction with law enforcement.

She emphasized that a chief concern is to improve the safety of the individual so that person can stay in their own home.

"Most victims don't want to come into the shelter unless that's an absolute last resort," Olson said. "They prefer to maintain their autonomy and indepen-

dence."

She said the two main goals of the program are to hold perpetrators accountable and to ensure the safety of the survivor and children.

"We don't just look at intimate partner (relationships)," Olson said, "We look at parent-child situations, sibling — whatever is going on within a household that rises to the level that the police are called. If it's domestic in nature."

Honish stressed the importance of the program.

"I am so grateful to all the members of the high risk teams for their support, dedication and commitment in reviewing cases on a monthly basis," she said, also adding that the goal of ensuring safety of the victim and family members.

In the first 11 months of 2019, the Marinette County team received 110 LAPs, with 36 of those being identified as high danger. Oconto County, in the same 11-month time period, received 55 LAPs, with 23 being identified as high danger.

RURAL LIVING

Olson and Honish have been invited to attend an international conference this spring in Washington, D.C., where they will present on High Risk Teams in rural areas.

"We actually think that the need for these kind of teams are more important in rural areas," Olson said. "Because if you live in Milwaukee, you have a neighbor who lives next door to you that's going to hear if you have something going on. And the amount of time it takes for the police to get to your house is going to be pretty short. In large rural counties like we have, if somebody is living in a

remote part of the county and it's a night, they call 911, it may take an officer an hour to get there at top speed. And if they are on another call already when there's limited staffing at night, that can be problematic."

She said another factor is the length of time it takes for emergency medical care to arrive in an outlying rural area. "The longer it takes you to get to a hospital, the more likely you're going to pass away," she said

Olson said possible poor internet service and cellphone coverage, coupled with the isolation and slower response time for police and medical calls enhance the need for proactive intervention in rural areas.

THE FUTURE AND THE MOTIVATION

Although High Risk Teams are relatively new to Wisconsin, Olson expects to see growth. She said staff members from several counties have observed the local meetings.

"We've had district attorneys and advocates from a couple different shelters," she said. "Some have come back multiple times to see how this works. I think they want to figure this out. It's a relatively new protocol."

Back in April of 2013, in a high-profile case, Rainbow House advocate Trish Waschbisch was murdered by her live-in boyfriend in her Peshtigo home. Olson said the horrific killing of the popular advocate still serves as motivation.

"We're very compelled, of course, by what happened at Rainbow House with the loss of Trish," she said. "The idea that we might be able to prevent some other family from going through that kind of suffering motivates our work every day."



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