

Women's league slams isle policy on home violence

Written by Lori Tighe | Star-Bulletin
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Note from AngelGroup: This 1998 article still has relevant points that are applicable to 'today'. Please take a moment to read and contact your local League of Women Voters to get involved.

Abusers get 42 percent of funds as shelters go lacking, its report says

Hawaii's response to domestic violence is uncoordinated, unsafe and unjust, leaving victims vulnerable to continued abuse and death, according to a two-year study by the League of Women Voters.

More people, mostly women, are dying from domestic violence in Hawaii while other communities have appeared to manage the crime, said the report, recently released to 400 statewide League members.

Domestic violence accounts for 30 percent of Honolulu's killings, compared with 6 percent in San Diego. Some cities, including Quincy, Mass., and Duluth, Minn., have had very few domestic violence homicides in the past 10 years, the report said.

According to victims interviewed for the report, emergency shelters in Honolulu have had rats, locked refrigerators, bug-infested mattresses and few employees and resources. Some victims said they were turned away from the Honolulu shelter, which has a no-turnaway policy.

"One reason women return to their abusers is because they have no other way to provide food and shelter for their children," the report said.

"When public funding dries up, so do their options for the future."

The report was intended to educate the league's 400 statewide members to form a position on domestic violence for future law-making efforts, said its president, Jean Aoki.

Although not meant for public consumption, the report circulated among leaders of the domestic-violence community, who criticized it while also acknowledging its validity.

"The tone and negativity are so dismaying and discouraging," said Carol Lee, executive director of the nonprofit Hawaii State Coalition on Domestic Violence. "Do we have a perfectly coordinated community response? No. And no one else does, either. It's part of our vision, and we're working very hard to reach that."

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"The report doesn't make me mad," said Nanci Kreidman, executive director of the nonprofit Domestic Violence Clearing House and Legal Hotline. "It makes me wonder if their commitment to assisting in the effort is genuine and cooperative."

A big chunk of Hawaii's money spent on domestic violence goes to help the abuser, while victim services are underfunded, the report said. Of the \$7.3 million spent by the state in 1996 for domestic violence and sex assault, 42 percent funded services for the abuser.

Poor enforcement of temporary restraining orders also endangers women and children's lives, the report said. The husbands of many dead women had numerous restraining order violations.

The report cites the Marcie Llacuna case in particular. Her ex-boyfriend, John Lewis, shot and killed the 24-year-old woman and her mother before turning the gun on himself Dec. 5, 1995. Lewis had seven temporary restraining order violations.

The league's study concluded that the communities in Hawaii, with the exception of Maui, need improved coordination between service providers, local police departments, the prosecutor's office and the judiciary.

The report praised Maui's domestic-violence response, calling it Hawaii's exemplary model.

Efforts in Hawaii to create a community response to domestic violence have been unsuccessful, the report charged. Each of the county task forces, the Hawaii State Coalition of Domestic Violence, the Violence Against Women Act Planning Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee on Domestic and Sexual Violence has segments of the domestic-violence service community. But none has managed to organize the community into a coordinated program, the report said.

"It makes it seem a coordinated community response is an easy thing to achieve, and we're standing in the way," Kreidman said. "The historic movement taking place must be part of the whole story. We used to have nothing. Now we have lots of things, and things that need to be changed. We're working fast and furiously to change them."

Kreidman disputed some facts in the report, such as the claim that policy-makers don't take her organization seriously. She cited the successful passage of the omnibus domestic violence bill by the Legislature this year, which her agency supported. The new law stiffens sentencing and fines for domestic abuse convictions and restraining order violations.

Others such as Ina Percival, outgoing director of Hawaii's State Commission on the Status of Women, applaud the report.

"I commend the League of Women Voters for taking an issue and cogently addressing it. We have raised the level of discussion and broadened it. We are making progress.

"Could we be doing a much better job? Yes. Even a blank check won't solve the problems. We need greater accountability."

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Agency turf protection has contributed to a muffling effect within the domestic-violence community, said Percival, who recently became the new director of the Domestic Violence Women's Network in Seattle.

"Change is fearful, and territories and egos are at stake," Percival said. "But women continue to die from this, and it's got to stop."

Lack of staff, coordination trip up the system

Major points from the Report on Domestic Violence and Victim Safety in Hawaii:

- **Poor policy** - Lack of coordination has resulted in uneven distribution of resources, poor policy development and little accountability.
- **Death reviews** - Honolulu's prosecutor's office hasn't strongly endorsed death review teams, which examine domestic violence-related homicides and try to determine where the system failed.
- **Hot lines** - 24-hour hot lines are available on all islands, except for Lanai, which uses Maui's. They are understaffed, often with unpaid volunteers.
- **Program cuts** - Programs for children have been cut from almost all budgets.
- **More shelters** - More transitional housing shelters are needed throughout the state.
- **Follow-up funds** - Case management, assisting and advocating for victims throughout the system, is among the most under-funded areas in domestic-violence services. Neighbor islands have no case management.
- **Spiritual support** - Spiritual support is limited at shelters receiving state funding and deserves further exploration.
- **Social workers** - Many social workers with Child Protective Services don't understand spouse abuse, don't recognize abusive partners and often support abusive fathers, survivors say.
- **Legal services** - Some victims said their abusers took temporary restraining orders out on them, which eliminated their legal advocacy services. Victims and abusers need to be better distinguished by the advocacy groups helping with the restraining orders.
- **Restraining orders** - Many restraining orders are never served because perpetrators can't be found. Maui is the exception with a 97 percent service rate.
- **Kid visits** - Supervised visitation centers where parents can drop off their kids and pick them up without abuser contact need to be more easily accessible.
- **Hiding is hard** - Several obstacles make it impossible for abuse survivors to hide their identity: The state requires name changes to be published in the newspaper, permission of both parents to change a child's name, and an affidavit from the prosecutor's office to change a Social Security number.