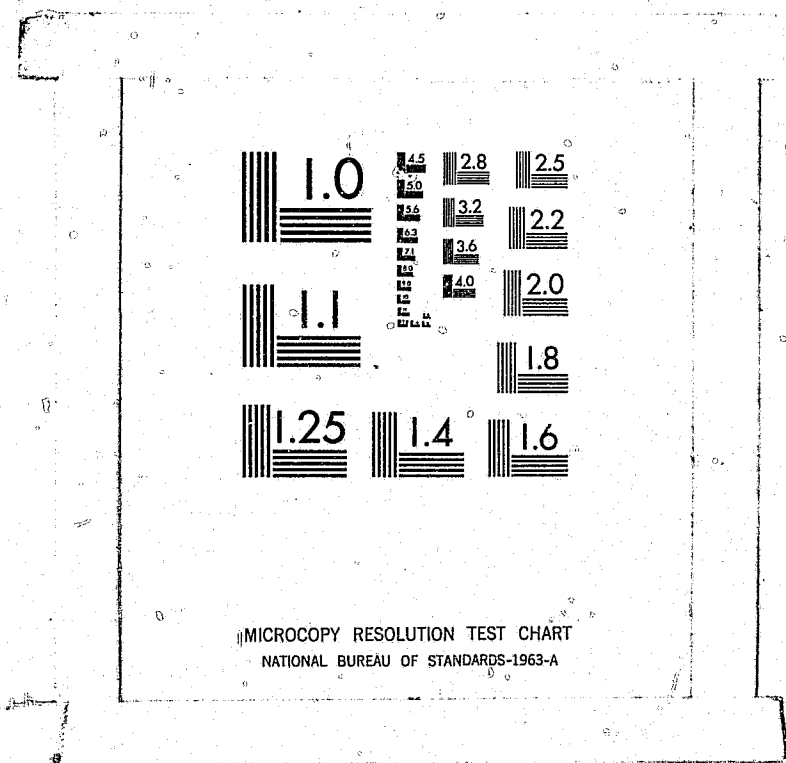


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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN RURAL AMERICA
PROBLEMS & POSSIBLE SOLUTIONSPresented by Shirley J. Kuhle, GRI, CRS
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ACQUISITIONS

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(Nebraska Crime Commission)President, Nebraska Task Force on Domestic Violence
Board Member, National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA)X
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN RURAL AMERICA
PROBLEMS & POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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by

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A recent Harris poll in Kentucky revealed that one woman in ten had experienced some form of spousal violence in the last 12 months.** Of these, only 10% had actually called the police. 21% had experienced violence at some time during the marriage. This under reporting led to the following observation: and I quote.

Family Violence, for outward appearances, seems to be a problem on society's periphery mainly because incidents involving low income and low education women get reported to police much more frequently than those involving the middle class and the better educated. Yet data on actual incidence of spousal violence indicates no significant differences among income and education groups. The poor become part of the official police record; the middle class conceals its family violence from public and official view.*

From this the question arises, does this underreporting indicate that the victim does not want assistance? In examining the survey further, it can be found that while only 5% received counseling, 34% wanted counseling. 2% received legal assistance while 27% wanted some form of legal aid. Only 2% receiving emergency shelter; 25% wanted it.* Another question arises here: if the victims wanted the services, why didn't they receive them?

The answer in rural America is that they often could not. Sparse population and great distances between neighbors create an isolation that is psychological as well as physical. In fact, the rural woman caught in a violent home situation suffers a great special sort of isolation. There is the obvious geographic location of a farm woman who may live anywhere from five to 50 miles, or even farther, from her nearest neighbor or from the nearest town, and, therefore, from help of any kind. This means that the battered, who is generally over-possessive by nature and actually wants to segregate his victim from society and thus make her completely dependent upon him, both emotionally and financially, has a perfect built-in situation in which to do so. The women who suffer this geographical as well as societal isolation have the same feelings of depression and despair which all abused wives have in common, but they are likely to be more severe because she is really very much alone in her plight. We all quote from the expert, Erin Prizzey, who says: "They all scream quietly so the neighbor won't hear; but with rural women it won't really matter whether or not they scream at all!"

Transportation is a critical problem in rural areas, where public transportation is unheard of. For a woman to leave the house after a beating, whether permanently or only for a night, or to keep an appointment at the welfare office, she needs transportation, and in rural areas this means a car. If she cannot drive or cannot get the keys or does not have money for gas, then she cannot take the family car. This means that she must rely on a friend, relative, law enforcement officer, or service provider. If none of these are available, she must walk.

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It is important to realize that any transportation is directly tied to road conditions and weather. A snow storm can block travel to a town for days. Rain can make dirt roads impassable. Either condition would inhibit walking. If the woman does manage to reach town, and if the town is on a well-traveled highway, she should be able to catch a bus — unless it has already been through town for that day. In that case, she will need a place to stay.

Safe shelter in rural areas is difficult to come by. There is generally only one motel in towns of 4,000 population or less. Since everyone's car is generally know, and motel clerks are not bound by confidentiality guidelines, the whole town, not to mention the abuser, could soon know where the victim is located.

This points up another problem with which people born and raised in rural areas are quite familiar: the local "gossip mill." Because everyone in small towns usually knows everyone else's business, I believe an attitude of concealment is much more common in smaller communities than it is anywhere else. For example, in a city, if a woman calls for help, she can usually remain anonymous, whereas in a small town, if she calls for help, she will very likely be the main topic of conversation the next day, and she knows it. This alone is sufficient to prevent many women from leaving home or seeking help.

The law enforcement people, who traditionally don't like to become involved in family disputes, are especially reluctant in small communities when they know both parties personally. Those of us who have worked with domestic violence — rural or urban — have encountered many of the same problems in dealing with public officials, but several factors are present in smaller communities which must be considered unique. One is, as I have said, this personal-familiarity situation, which is unavoidable in small towns. Added to this is the fact that, unlike a city, where the police force is generally quite large, the likelihood of the same officer's being summoned to the same home is greatly increased in small towns where there are perhaps only three or four officers to be called. We often find that they are very antagonistic toward chronic cases, especially if the wife had called before, even a few times. It has not been uncommon for them to ignore her calls for help altogether by telling themselves and the community: "So-and-so is at it again." Besides being few in number, rural law enforcement personnel often have little training. In outstate Nebraska, for example, all that is required to become an officer is several weeks at the Nebraska Law Enforcement Center, and there is no provision for in-service training, as such. Procedure policies are generally set at area meetings which can include ten or more counties. This means that when a poor policy is adopted, it can be very widespread. For example, we found that in a number of counties officials had devised what they decided was the best solution to family-dispute calls — simply to jail both husband and wife. This procedure, we were told, not only served to separate the parties but also discouraged future calls. We even had highway patrolmen tell us this was what they did because they were included in the area meetings. It is hard to believe that anyone would ignore or even jail a woman who has been beaten, but that is what was happening. Women were also receiving very poor advice concerning their legal rights because, to tell the truth, law enforcement officers themselves in rural areas may not know what the statutes are or what options are available to a woman who has been assaulted. And women trying to get divorces experience similar problems. In rural areas, a lawyer may refuse to take a divorce case, especially if he knows either party or if he knows that violence is involved. Furthermore, many states require conciliation attempts via counselors or ministers. Counseling has been known to dissuade many victims. Some churches or ministers have interpreted the Bible to read that a wife is bound to her husband no matter what his actions. They have determined that the husband's role as protector and overseer of his wife can justify his use of discipline. Professional counselors

have accused victims of avoiding the problem by divorcing the cause. Instead, they are encouraged to return home and take responsibility for their role in the attacks, analyze what behaviors provoked the attacks, and modify these behaviors. Although it is becoming recognized that it is, in reality, the abuser who is responsible for his own actions, many counselors are not so enlightened. Besides the law enforcement and legal system, women can also seek help from social services, of which the most widely available is public welfare. Many victims do not want to go on welfare as there is a great social stigma in rural areas on those who cannot care for themselves. Grocery clerks have been publically rude to persons with food stamps. County welfare directors have denied services, even when the applicant is eligible, because they personally feel she does not deserve assistance. County boards have interrogated hopeful AFDC applicants until they have burst into tears. But, to a woman without resources in a rural area, there is little alternative.

Although other human service providers exist, the area's population base is often insufficient to justify a full time position. Until recently the closest mental-health group for some areas was 80 miles away, and that's not uncommon. In one area a mental-health counselor divides her time among all the towns in a four-county region, but she is so overburdened with work that she cannot accept any new cases.

Another problem relates to the distance factor in rural areas affects one service we almost always take for granted: the telephone. Calls between towns are nearly always long distance, so cost can be a factor prohibiting women from seeking help. Also, she may be afraid to place a long distance call that could be easily traced and hard to explain when the phone bill arrives. Additionally, party lines, which unfortunately are popular eaves dropping tools for town gossips, are still prevalent in rural areas.

All the factors I have just mentioned work together to greatly compound the difficulties involved in trying to meet the needs of victims of family violence. The solutions to these problems will require creativity and persistence.

One area in which an immense amount of work needs to be done is education and training. While this is true every where, it is particularly true in rural areas, because rural can be defined as a mindset typified by an essentially conservative outlook on sex roles, the family and methods of problem solving. There is widespread acceptance of stereotypic roles, and many people, including women, believe it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife.

We need large-scale educational programs directed at the general public to raise awareness of the problem of domestic violence and to dispel the myths and stereotypes that surround it. We can use local newspaper, radio, public TV, and volunteers can speak to churches and civic groups. We need to examine the causes of violence and teach people alternative ways of dealing with stress, tension, and anger. We need to change attitudes toward women, women's roles in society, the "macho" concept of masculinity, and violence of all types. We must make it clear that violent behavior is unacceptable. Children must receive special attention in these programs, for they are our hope for a non-violent future.

We need special training for law-enforcement and mental-health agencies, legal and medical personnel. Often such agencies and personnel accept the myths and are unsympathetic or, when they want to help, are unprepared, both personally and within their agencies, to deal with the complexities of a battered woman's dilemma.

Teachers and school counselors need information and training, too, to recognize behavior patterns in children that may indicate abuse in the home. In rural areas, the teacher is the person a child is most likely to approach about personal problems, and is the person who has the most contact with the child. Many children are victims of abuse. Many more are indirect victims of violence in the home, and their teachers must become sensitive to these indirect effects on the children.

We need to establish transportation systems to make human services more available, because public transportation is inadequate at best in the cities of these regions and nonexistent in the small towns and rural areas. In South Dakota, a plan is being developed to provide a "relay" system for victims to be transported by volunteers each forty miles until a safe house or shelter is reached. Since there are only five shelters in the state at this time, it would take a large number of volunteers to carry out this plan. However, it remains a remarkable idea which could be used in other states.

Emergency and long term shelters are hard to find in rural areas. For example, there are no long-term shelters in Nebraska. The best we have been able to provide in rural Nebraska are emergency shelters in motels outside the immediate area or in homes of local task-force members far enough from the natural home situation that the victims can remain anonymous. Often, there are no legal-aid resources, and this has presented a serious problem considering the fact that we many times encourage women to take rather serious legal steps to solve their dilemmas. Some local task-force groups have dealt with this lack of legal-aid resources by working with attorneys to develop a revolving system by which each one will accept cases of this nature periodically; other groups are pursuing the possibility of counties' hiring a public defender by district with four or five counties sharing the cost.

We need to expand and coordinate the services that are available. Local volunteer groups have proved very effective in rural areas and need support. In Nebraska, there are 20 projects for victims of domestic violence. Most of these projects rely heavily, and some entirely, on volunteers. Furthermore, over half of these projects are in towns with populations under 10,000, and they are the main service providers in their area. Cooperation and networking among agencies and volunteer groups is essential and must be encouraged. Some services, such as shelters, may work best on a regional level in rural areas. This means cooperation and communication. All these efforts must be aimed at the empowerment of women.

And finally, what can we do about the abuser? Is he not also a victim, trapped with a violent behavior pattern that he neither understands nor believes wrong. Can we find a solution to this victim's problems besides punishment of jail, finds or committing him to institutions, mental or penal? Since this is the basis for our problem of family violence, what else can be done for him? Can we change this behavior or channel this aggression to better society rather than abuse it? Yes, it is being done.

In the last few years there have been more and more programs developed to deal with the abuser. Most of these programs are an extension of existing shelters and shelter programs who were already providing service to women and children who were victims. But although this is still a relatively new field, many abuser groups are actively working throughout the United States to stop the cycle of violence and provide the hope that these families in trouble can be held together. Most of these programs are currently only in the larger cities, however, by gaining more knowledge of how to work with the abuser towards change, this important information can be shared with smaller communities and eventually the rural areas to provide hope that abuse can be curtailed and the family unit can remain in peace and understanding of each other.

All these projects need funding, of course, and funding is a major problem in rural areas. Some areas receive money from county revenue sharing, state allocations, and county or state tax receipts from offender's fines and marriage license fees, but sparse population and great distances increase costs, and the small population means less money available internally. Because there is less population, therefore fewer victims in rural areas, government funding sources tend to excuse their lack of aid as being less cost effective per capita. However, that should not penalize victims who must remain victims in their own homes just because they prefer to continue living a rural lifestyle. The private sector could provide funds for programs and child care services to victims who wish to separate

from their violent spouses and support themselves and their families by working in small town factories, as many of them are doing now. The billions of dollars lost annually by industry in work time as result of family violence could be lessened, at least in part, by contributions and cooperation of these same industries.

Now we come down to the bottom line. Who can or will provide the time and energy involved in implementing all these changes and possible solutions.

Most likely, it will be the grass roots programs which have sprung up all over the country in both urban and rural areas. The dedicated people who have worked so valiantly to start programs and task forces to provide encouragement, alternatives, and shelter to victims and their children, will not give up. Let us hope that more and more people who provide the traditional services will provide more cooperation and funding to these groups.

These programs are indeed the only service organizations that have been able to help the victim get it all together; where these programs exist, there is no more hunting from agency to agency for help. The available crisis lines operated by these programs provide not only help, information, and referrals, but most importantly, provide a service to any victim who calls just by providing an understanding ear.

The services they provide include counseling and advocacy that formerly was not available. These programs also provide the only emergency shelter that victims seek, even though they may be filled, few are turned away. In areas where no shelter house is available, volunteers open their homes to victims or transport them to a safer location. Networking between communities and states is becoming commonplace, offering a side choice of referral resources. More cooperation from law enforcement is evident, although it is still not perfect, because these programs can assist the officer who doesn't know what to do with a battered victim. State legislatures are finally passing laws against spouse abuse, some states have included funding of shelters and task forces in their appropriations, although the amounts are never enough.

There will never be enough volunteers, safe houses or services to meet the need of these unfortunate victims. But, we are doing something about it and have come a long way in just a few years. With the help and support of interested professionals such as you here today, much more will be done.

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