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Nowhere to Go: Why Does LA County Refuse to Help Male Victims of Domestic Violence?

By Glenn Sacks

When Jack Barnes' wife attacked him by surprise and gouged deep, painful scratches into his eyes with her nails, he knew he needed to get out and he knew he needed help. But he found that little help was available.

Why? Because he's male.

"I got out of the hospital and I had nowhere to go. I called the County Domestic Violence hotline and they told me the only shelter that accepts abused men in all of Los Angeles County is in Lancaster. I work in downtown Los Angeles--80 miles away. With rush hour traffic, it would take me 2½ or 3 hours each way to commute to work. And how would my kids stay in school?"

While L.A. County funds two dozen shelters for victims of domestic violence, the only shelter which accepts male victims is the Valley Oasis shelter in Lancaster. Former Oasis director Patricia Overberg, who courageously changed shelter policy in order to accept male domestic violence victims in the late 1980s, says that what L.A. County is doing is discriminatory and illegal, and that it is leaving itself vulnerable to a class-action lawsuit.

"I've seen men travel 100 miles each way to receive services that were available to women in their own neighborhoods but not to them," she says. "This is an important human rights issue."

Valley Oasis' current director, Carol Ensign, argues powerfully for increased funds for shelters, services, and outreach for men.

"The research and evidence show that domestic abuse of men is a problem similar in magnitude to that of abuse of women," she says. "Forty years ago, the abuse of women was veiled in shame and secrecy. We've moved light years ahead since in gaining recognition, acceptance, and help for battered women. Yet we bury male victimization. We need to reach out to male victims. We need to teach them to ask for help. And society needs to see that yes, very often it is the 6'2" male who is the one getting attacked by his 5'5" wife."

Ensign has a large body of research on her side. Veteran domestic violence researchers Richard Gelles, Murray Straus, and Susan Steinmetz, who were once hailed by the women's movement for their pioneering work on violence against women,

have repeatedly found that women are just as likely as men to physically attack their spouses or partners. Cal State Long Beach professor Martin Fiebert has compiled and summarized 117 different studies with over 72,000 respondents that found that women are as responsible for initiating and engaging in domestic violence as men are. Studies by researchers R.I. McNeeley and Coramae Richey Mann show that women frequently compensate for their smaller size by employing the element of surprise and using weapons, often including guns, knives, boiling water, bricks, fireplace poker and baseball bats.

Crime statistics indicate large imbalances in the number of domestic violence incidents against men and women largely because, as studies have shown, an abused woman is many times more likely to report abuse than an abused man. Many men hesitate to call the police because they assume, often correctly, that the police will automatically treat them as if they are the perpetrator.

Activists from Stop Abuse for Everyone (SAFE), a non-profit group dedicated to expanding services for all victims of domestic violence (male or female), have taken the issue to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. According to attorney Marc Angelucci, the California chairman of SAFE, while some officials seem cautiously sympathetic, none so far have been willing to come out firmly in support of getting help for abused men. Deputies for Mike Antonovich and Zev Yaroslavsky have said that they are studying the issue.

Male domestic violence victims like Mark Grayson, a San Fernando Valley educator who was attacked by his ex-wife on several occasions, bristle at the idea that the county has to investigate to see whether or not abused men's needs are being met when there is only one, distant shelter willing to accept them.

"When I tried to get help it felt as if I first had to prove that we [male victims] exist," he says. "When my ex-wife stabbed me in the back with a piece of silverware, instead of going to the hospital I should have gone to the county supervisors with the silverware still stuck in my back. Maybe then they would have seen that male victims need help too."

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