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The Public Ought to Know: Boro domestic violence victims have helping hand

By Corey Bearak

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October is Domestic Violence month. Some think the focus should be abuse by one partner in a relationship, married or otherwise, against the other. That detracts from the overwhelming problem - violence towards women. Domestic violence initiatives must focus on preventing this disturbing violence.

Reported felony assaults related to domestic violence decreased 9 percent in the fiscal year ended June 2004 compared to the fiscal year ended June 2003. Over the same period, reported domestic violence-related murder increased 9 percent and reported domestic violence-related rape increased 7 percent.

As this month began, the mayor joined Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes to announce a special center that would offer - under one roof - legal and social services including day care to domestic violence victims. A federal Justice Department grant, \$1.2 million, provides significant support for this center expected to serve 7,000 adults, mostly women. The city's district attorneys deserve credit for seeking and obtaining similar grants.

Queens District Attorney Richard Brown's office received, with the Queens Borough President's office and Safe Horizon, a multi-year Federal Violence Against Women Act grant. It supports a dedicated Domestic Violence Bureau staffed with experienced, specially-trained attorneys.

The bureau doubled the conviction rate for Queens domestic violence cases; it uses innovative techniques including early intervention with victims, vertical prosecution (same prosecutor handling the case from beginning to end) and evidence-based prosecution (where the victim will not testify). Queens also has an Integrated Domestic Violence Part where one judge

handles both the civil and criminal aspects of a case involving family violence.

According to the Mayor's Management Report, the Human Resources Administration services victims of domestic violence through contracts with 35 state licensed residential programs and 15 non-residential programs, and through various administration-run programs. These programs maintain hotlines, provide crisis intervention counseling and make referrals for social services. New contracts provide for legal services in all five boroughs.

In the latest Mayor's Management Report, the Human Resources Administration introduced a new indicator, the number of domestic violence emergency shelter beds, to monitor services provided to domestic violence victims. The administration maintained the same capacity of domestic violence emergency shelter beds, 1,832, in the past two fiscal years. A new sub-indicator - non-residential program active caseload of the administration- changed only slightly in the last two fiscal years, 1,626 monthly up from 1,606.

The New York Police Department addresses domestic violence incidents, according to the MMR. Each police precinct includes a team that works with domestic violence victims to protect them against repeat incidents.

The NYPD also equips each precinct with a digital camera to document domestic violence injuries in time. It also digitally records 911 calls involving domestic violence. Prosecutors can use both at arraignments. This proves important because 911 calls and digital photographs introduced at an arraignment sharply increases the chances that a domestic abuser gets jailed pending a trial.

Removing the abuser makes the victim safer and can allow victims and any children to remain in their home. This evidence can prove crucial in a criminal trial or as a "hammer" in any plea bargaining.

The Department for the Aging is the lead agency in the New York City Interagency Elder Abuse Training Program. A two-year federal Justice Department grant funds this partnership that also include includes the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence, the NYPD, the Jewish Association for Services for the Aged, and the Center Against Domestic Violence. These city and non-profit agencies are working together to

develop and implement a training curriculum for law enforcement officials and members of the criminal justice community.

The New York City Housing Authority held 236 community education seminars on domestic violence, according to the Mayor's Management Report. It also provides intervention services to domestic violence victims. Through its Emergency Transfer Program, the housing authority refers its resident for counseling when they are victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse, as well as intimidated victims or witnesses. The housing authority deemed eligible for, approved and granted priority transfer status to 532 of 1,796 requests during the past fiscal year.

A December 2003 amendment to the City's Human Rights Law requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to victims of domestic violence, sex offenses or stalking.

Violence against women seems too often a behind-closed-doors, could-not-would-not-happen-here kind of crime. Though instances occur where men are victims, the problem remains institutional bias against women. The related problem of the glass ceiling in employment and proportionately more women or women-led households facing poverty and related issues also plays a role.

While government and community agencies do their part, the public at large must also work to erase institutional and societal biases against women. It's about protecting and respecting our daughters, our sisters and our moms.

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