

northwest

Help at Hand

Organizations reach out to domestic violence victims

by Malka Geffen

Many myths exist about domestic violence in same-sex relationships. It doesn't occur nearly as often as within heterosexual relationships. The abuse is usually mutual. Same-sex domestic violence is sexual behavior—a form of sadomasochism—and is inherently consensual.

The fact is that violence within homosexual relationships is as common as with our heterosexual counterparts, but support, prevention and protection services are fewer and less accessible. With the prevalent hesitancy to report incidents of domestic violence within the sexual minorities community, it is difficult to assess the need for more services and a willingness of victims or batterers to use them.

"There definitely is some stigma attached to being in a same-sex relationship with domestic violence," said Sara Johnson, lesbian director of the Portland Police Bureau's WomenStrength self defense program. "There's more hesitancy to report for fear of how it will be received by the police, that it will not be taken seriously or that police will accuse the wrong person."

Although officers are trained in issues of domestic violence specifically in same-sex relationships, Johnson said it can become more confusing for the officer to identify the victim in a situation of two men or two women. She also points to the strong sense of community as a possible reason for apprehension.

"There is a sense that we can deal with this on our own rather than reporting to the police," Johnson said. "While the cycle of violence is pretty much the same for same-sex couples as heterosexual couples, there is the added component of the threat to out someone or reveal their HIV status."

Bradley-Angle House provides survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault of all backgrounds, cultures, ages and sexual orientations a continuum of supportive services. The women-battered-by-women support group has been a service of Bradley-Angle since the early 1980s, and its sexual and gender minority services program began in the mid-'90s.

Coordinator Melissa Adams joined the organization in November, bringing with her 10 years of experience working with domestic violence and sexual assault. "So much abuse happens in our communities, and so little attention is given to it," said Adams, who has been affected personally by domestic violence. "We can provide anybody in the queer community with peer support, advocacy, case management and help finding shelter."

Adams believes it's time to expand the program to support more community members affected by abuse. "It is at my discretion to broaden the program to include a men's group, a group for self-identified elder lesbians, a genderqueer/trans group, possibly one for youth—it depends on feedback and willing facilitators," Adams said during a recent Sexual Minorities Roundtable meeting at the Portland Police Bureau. "If people come forward and present the need, I can step forward and provide the programs."

She explains the necessity for representative groups in terms of the community's relative size and isolation. "If the abuser is within the same small network of people

as the person seeking support, that can feel really alienating. It can be lifesaving for someone to be able to stay within the community and connect immediately with people going through similar things," she said. Adams added that the support groups are completely confidential and a good place to learn about patterns of abuse, develop safety plans and identify one's own strengths.

For cases with high risk of abuser re-engagement or lethality, the Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team works to keep the victim safe while making the offender accountable. This two-year-old Multnomah County program, which screens 500 cases a year and serves 120 of the highest-risk cases, has only provided assistance in a few same-sex domestic violence cases, according to project manager Joslyn Baker.

"If you come to us, you're asking for a very specific type of intervention," she said. "Once you're in with us, you're pretty much working with the police, and we believe they're an effective part of prevention."

Baker said the program makes itself available to Queer Caucus and other advocacy groups to better serve the sexual minorities population. "We want the victim's voice to be at the forefront in the case, we let a victim know what different programs can do to help, we keep each case very individual, and we advocate for each person no matter how it's played out," she added.

Batterers within the queer community also have a place to find help. Choices, a local batterer's intervention program, offers groups for male and female offenders and has developed a curriculum for same-sex and trans batterers. "It's just in the development stage and we've had no referrals yet, but we have the structure of the group ready to go and clients interested in switching over," said director Christine Crowe. "People are generically court-ordered to batterer's intervention, and then we'll let them know the option is available." jo

For more information about BRADLEY-ANGLE HOUSE support groups, contact Melissa Adams at 503-232-7805, ext. 3, when it is safe to talk or leave a message with a safe phone number where you can be reached. You can also e-mail melissaa@bradleyangle.org. To learn more about the Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team, call 503-988-6440 or e-mail joslyn.r.baker@co.multnomah.or.us. For more information on the Choices program call 503-239-7597 or visit www.choicesdvp.com.



Pets of domestic violence victims are safely housed at the Oregon Humane Society.

No Pet Left Behind

Humane Society to the rescue

Victims of domestic violence, gay and straight, face seemingly insurmountable challenges when trying to leave their situation. The thought of having to leave a pet behind with an abuser is enough to keep some people trapped.

Because connections between human violence and animal cruelty exist, the Greenhill Humane Society in Eugene started the country's first domestic violence assistance program in February 1997. Manager Theresa Iverson said the organization works with representatives from Womenspace Domestic Violence Services and the Lane Council for Domestic Violence to assist victims with pets. The shelter will provide confidential foster homes at no charge for 30 days and require the pet to be spayed or neutered and get vaccinations, which the shelter provides pro bono, before leaving.

"A lot of times people won't leave abusers because they have pets, and some shelters can't take animals or their relatives can't take them," said Iverson. "We're here for the animals and to help the victims get things in order."

According to spokeswoman Barbara Baugnon, the Oregon Humane Society in Portland offers similar assistance. "We work with the social workers and caseworkers of the victims and will take the pet for two weeks free of charge," she said. "People shouldn't have to forfeit everything they love in their life just because they're trying to flee an abusive situation." jo

To ACCESS GREENHILL HUMANE SOCIETY'S domestic violence assistance program, contact Womenspace at 541-485-6513 or visit www.enddomesticviolence.com. Visit the OREGON HUMANE SOCIETY at www.oregonhumane.org.

MARTY DAVIS



Melissa Adams is the sexual and gender minorities services coordinator at Bradley-Angle House.

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