

Domestic Violence Services helping survivors through pandemic

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and Domestic Violence Services wants people to know the nonprofit is still going strong during the pandemic.

"We are here for people every day, 24 hours a day," Director Kathryn Chaney said.

DVS, which provides services for Umatilla and Morrow counties, is considered an essential service and was able to operate its shelters for victims of domestic violence throughout the year. Chaney said the nonprofit has made adjustments for more social distancing and cleaning in shelters and in its offices, and offers many more virtual options for events.

"We held two online trainings since the pandemic started for our crisis line volunteers, and they were very successful," Chaney said. "We got several new volunteers."

The crisis line, at 800-833-1161, is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year-round. Chaney said volunteers can talk to people about an immediate crisis, but also sometimes people also just want someone to talk to about the pain they're experiencing, or they want to explore their options if they were to decide to leave their abuser.

"They may not feel they have the option to leave now, but we can do safety planning for if the situation escalates," she said.

Domestic Violence Services is also running several support groups via Zoom. Some are for survivors of domestic violence, others focus on survivors of sexual abuse specifically.

There are also groups for people with family members, friends or coworkers who are experiencing domestic violence. Chaney said sometimes people struggle with watching the person they care about go through abusive situations, and they want to know how best to talk with that person about the situation without pushing them away by being judgmental.

People can also call the DVS advocacy centers in Hermiston, Pendleton, Boardman, Milton-Freewater and Heppner.

Chaney said DVS has learned a lot through the pandemic, and while it has been an adjustment doing more things virtually and over the phone, it has also

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The 24/7 Domestic Violence Services crisis line is 1-800-833-1161.

been a benefit, particularly for reaching people who are more isolated in rural areas of the counties.

Chaney said the pandemic's effects on domestic violence, particularly in the spring when people were mostly stuck at home, have been concerning to advocates. However, she said there hadn't been a big surge in requests for shelter.

Reports on domestic violence during the spring shutdown in Oregon were a mixed bag. The *East Oregonian* reported the Pendleton Police Department had seen a 50% increase in calls during April 2020 compared with April 2019 for all domestic offenses, such as assault, harassment and menacing, while Hermiston Police Department reported that domestic violence calls were down 27% in April. Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston said at the time that domestic violence calls make up a small enough volume of calls for departments of Hermiston and Pendleton's size that a small change in numbers can create a large percentage increase or decrease.

Chaney said there has been some additional state funding available due to the pandemic, including personal protective equipment available to shelters and a program that assists domestic violence victims affected by COVID-19 with their utility bills.

While DVS has canceled its usual in-person soup dinner fundraiser for Domestic Violence Awareness Month, the nonprofit is holding an online auction to raise funds. Bids can be placed online between 8 a.m. on Oct. 28 and 7 p.m. on Nov. 4. They are also selling raffle tickets for a five-night stay at a resort in Palm Springs, California. To register for the auction or the raffle, visit dvs.or-org or the Domestic Violence Services, Inc. Facebook page.

On Wednesday, Oct. 21, DVS is holding an online informational presentation on the effects of domestic violence on children from 5:30-7 p.m. To register to attend, email education@dvs-or.org or call 541-276-3322.



Jade McDowell/Hermiston Herald

A Ridgeway Village apartment building was damaged by fire on Oct. 4, 2020. No one was injured in the blaze but residents lost their homes.

Displaced residents describe apartment fire

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Residents displaced by a fire at Ridgeway Village apartments in Hermiston on Oct. 4 say they are still struggling to recover after losing their homes.

According to Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, the district responded to the apartments at 2:13 a.m. on Oct. 4 to find "heavy fire" coming out of the first-floor apartment and extending into the upstairs unit and eaves of the roof. Altogether, two apartments were damaged by fire and two by smoke and water damage. The district also had to put holes in the building in some places to attack the fire.

Linda R. Schoen, who lives in the apartment above where the fire apparently started, said she had gotten home and was "just trying to unwind" before getting into bed when she heard a commotion outside.

She said she has a neighbor with apparent mental illness issues who frequently yells outside late at night, and at first, she thought it was just that neighbor's usual ruckus. Then she realized the woman was shouting the word "fire."

"I thought, 'I'd better

look,' and I opened my window and smoke was pouring out the window," she said.

She ran downstairs and saw flames, so she pulled out her phone and called 911. She was so worried, she said, she couldn't remember her own apartment number when the dispatcher asked.

She said she ran back upstairs to get her dog, and then realized she had better pound on all the doors and windows in the building to make sure everyone got out.

Mariza Altaf was one of those neighbors. She had fallen asleep with the television and a fan turned up loud in anticipation of the usual nighttime yelling episodes, but couldn't ignore Schoen's insistent knocking and yelling that there was a fire.

"I ran out in my underwear," she said. "Linda was yelling, 'Get out, the building's on fire.' Every bone in my body was a noodle. I don't know how I did anything, but I grabbed my pants and my dog and my shoes on the way out the door."

She said Schoen was insistent in making sure everyone got out, pounding on walls next to people's bedrooms if they didn't come to the door.

Altaf said even though her apartment and belongings

were severely damaged, she has a good renter's insurance policy and expects to receive a payout to replace everything she lost. She said she was worried about Schoen, who lost everything and does not have the means to replace it.

"This woman saved my life," she said. "She was my friend before but now I'm indebted to her."

Schoen said the apartment complex was going to let her into her apartment to see what she might be able to salvage, and some people have offered to donate items. But right now she is staying in a small motel room, and said she doesn't have any room to store items or the money to rent a storage unit. She also doesn't know when she will get into a new apartment, as HUD was paying for her previous housing and the waiting list to get into a HUD apartment is months long.

According to a news release from UCFD1, no one was injured because "the occupants of the apartment complex were very effective at getting everyone out before fire crews arrived."

The department didn't return a call asking about the fire's cause.

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