

Opinion

Changing the culture

JOURNAL EDITORIAL STAFF

The North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence has started a 10-year push that seeks to prevent the maiming and the killing by changing our very culture. It's ambitious, to say the least. But this statewide initiative offering an array of programs is worthy of support. The alternative is to watch the human and financial costs of domestic violence escalate.

"Since the beginning of the battered-women's movement, we have known that if we really want to make the changes we need to increase safety for women and children, we must do nothing short of changing the culture and those supports for the continuation of domestic violence," Kathy Hodges of Chatham County's Family Violence and Rape Crisis Services told the Durham *Herald-Sun*.

There are signs of progress. The number of domestic-violence killings in Forsyth County dropped from seven in 2008 to three last year, for example. But the Forsyth County District Attorney's Office handled almost 2,900 domestic-violence cases last year, up from about 2,400 in 2007. About 50,000 people annually seek help from local domestic violence centers across North Carolina. Nearly a fifth of all adult women in North Carolina report physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner at some point in their lives, according to the Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and more than 13 percent of high-school students report being the victims of physical violence by boyfriends or girlfriends.

Those are the *reported* cases. Many victims suffer in silence, part and parcel of a culture that's done too little for too long to help them.

The fatal shooting last year of Sgt. Mickey Hutchens of the Winston-Salem Police Department by Monte Denard Evans, who'd been harassing his ex-wife at her work place, was a call to action. Officer Daniel Clark, who'd been pursuing Evans with Hutchens and was also shot by Evans, returned fire, killing Evans.

The tragedy didn't happen in a vacuum. Our culture contributes in many ways to domestic violence. Too many boys are never taught that it's wrong to hit a woman. Too many girls are never taught to stand up for themselves. And from gangsta-rap lyrics that call women "ho's" to teenagers using their cell phones to send nude photos of themselves -- "sexting" -- our culture encourages violence and sexual exploitation.

Forsyth has some good programs, including Safe on Seven, which brings together several agencies to help battered women and men navigate legal and social-services systems. But we must supplement such programs with more proactive efforts, such as the coalition's "10-Year Plan to Prevent Intimate Partner Violence."

As Jim O'Neill, the Forsyth District Attorney, said: "Domestic violence is a constant battle that we will never win unless, and until, healthy attitudes about how we treat women are instilled at an early stage in children's lives."

Sharee Fowler, who served on the steering committee for the coalition's effort, said that it's "an antidote to a Band-aid approach. Instead of always being in a reactive position, we have an opportunity to prevent violent relationships from occurring to begin with," said Fowler, who served on the committee when she worked for Family Services of Forsyth, Stokes and Davie counties.

Fowler said that we "don't have a lot of conversations in our communities about what healthy relationships look like. The 10-year plan is crafted around the idea of a paradigm shift, and the fact that it's never too early to talk to children about healthy relationships, whether it's friendship or the family, or they're starting to get in middle school and be in other relationships, such as dating." As Fowler noted, the coalition can't make this push alone. "It's not just the responsibility of local battered women's shelters or law enforcement," she said. "Everyone has a role in this."

The Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which has posted information on the initiative at nccadv.org, wants to work with houses of worship, community organizations, elementary and high schools, colleges and other groups to achieve its goals. Its 10-year effort is federally funded, but more financial support will be needed.

The coalition hopes to create statewide public-school programs to teach boys about masculinity and gender roles, the *Raleigh News & Observer* reported. Programs for girls will teach them that they're in control of their own bodies and health.

Family Services (fsifamily.org) has established similar programs in Winston-Salem. More programs are needed. Al Renna, the head of the agency, said he would like to apply some of the coalition's programs here.

The coalition wants to help prepare parents to teach their children about the problems of domestic violence. "We want girls to grow up feeling the power of the purse and know they don't need a man for validation and economic support," Jill Dinwiddie of the North Carolina Council for Women/Domestic Violence Commission told the Durham newspaper.

Attitudes are born and nurtured in the home. The culture that leads to domestic violence knows no socioeconomic boundaries. Nor does one that promotes self-respect, respect for one another and nonviolence. As a community, we need only choose.

#

#

#