

SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

"What we're hearing now from survivors who are finally reaching out – many of them are trying to hunker down until they can get out permanently and not just temporarily and try to create normalcy for their kids. Through these calls, we are hearing survivors disclosing serious, severe and repeated abuse. For many survivors, the abuse during this pandemic has significantly intensified."

Deb Mozden, Executive Director, Turning Points Network



New Hampshire Coalition Against
Domestic and Sexual Violence

OCTOBER 2020

www.nhcadsv.org

SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly impacted nearly every facet of life in the Granite State, and among the most affected have been individuals experiencing domestic and sexual violence. In an effort to respond to the profound toll the pandemic has had on survivors, the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the 13 member programs have worked tirelessly to adapt our services to provide critical, life-saving support to those in need across the state.

Annually, crisis centers serve more than 15,000 Granite Staters through prevention education, court and hospital accompaniment, crisis counseling, and connecting survivors to community resources. Advocates play a critical role in preventing violence in their communities, and helping survivors navigate the complex legal and criminal justice system as they seek help, healing and restitution. This has become increasingly difficult under the mandated stay-at-home order and call for social isolation.

COVID-19 has profoundly shaped crisis center operations, and over the last few months service delivery shifted from in-person advocacy to technology-based interventions. Advocates swiftly sought new and innovative ways to connect with survivors now trapped at home with their abusers, such as chat, text and video services. Despite the resilience and adaptability of crisis centers, long-term support is needed to sustain the work of domestic violence organizations, and respond effectively to the needs of survivors as we navigate life in a pandemic for an uncertain period of time.

Nearly 6 months into the pandemic there has already been grave consequences on the health and safety of survivors as they experience a new set of challenges to access the support they need, while simultaneously experiencing more severe cases of violence and abuse. Although the stay-at-home order has lifted, the impact of the pandemic will continue to be felt in our communities for months to come, continuing to interrupt businesses, schools, and local resources and services.

This brief provides an overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on survivors of domestic and sexual violence in New Hampshire over the last few months, and the need to continue supporting the work of crisis centers in furthering protections and services for survivors.

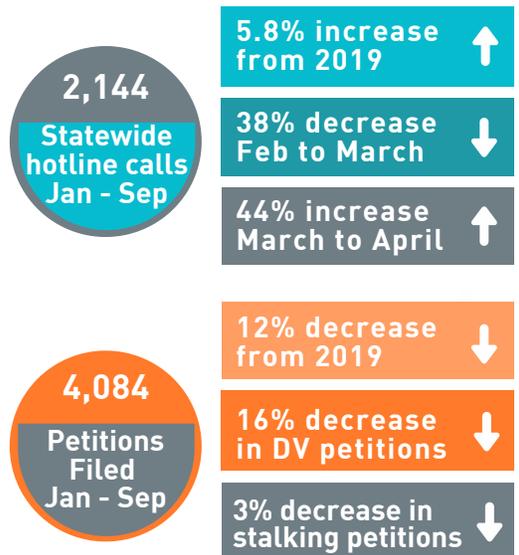
"I think we are going to see our services change historically during this time, especially with texting and being able to connect on the computer, but I also think it's a scary time, it's a scary time for our advocates, and more scary for our victims who can't report, can't get out."

Deb Weinstein, Executive Director at Starting Point

2019 Statewide Statistics for Domestic and Sexual Violence



2020 Domestic and Sexual Violence Statistics and Trends



Experiences of Survivors

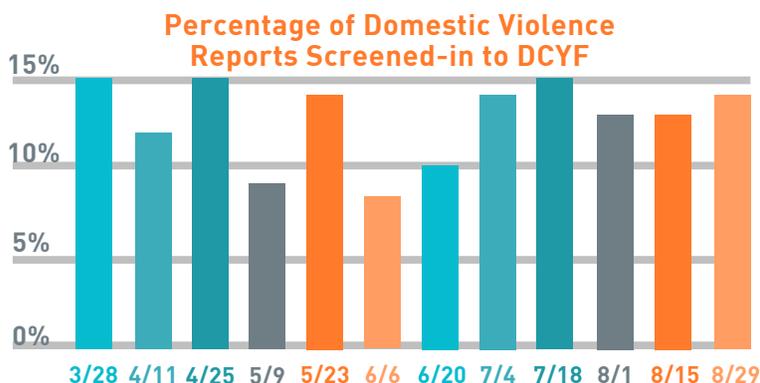
Domestic and Sexual Violence

Mandated social isolation, compounded with the fear of getting sick, instantly provided new ways for abusive partners to leverage power and control. Additionally, job loss and financial instability has augmented the impact of economic abuse, which further makes it difficult for survivors to access help. Since March, crisis centers have seen an increase in the lethality of cases that are being reported, suggesting that victims endure escalated violence before they are able or ready to seek support.

This has been a challenging time for survivors, many of whom have been trapped at home with their abusers, and isolated from their support networks. Such experiences can cause re-traumatization for individuals who have experienced abuse. As COVID-19 has had a severe impact on mental health and substance misuse in our communities, it is important to expand mental health and wellness services. This is especially important for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, who have a higher vulnerability to homelessness, substance abuse, and poverty compared to the general population who have never experienced abuse. It is essential that their access to support services remains uninhibited.

Child Abuse

Initially, the [Division of Children, Youth and Families](#) saw a drastic drop in the number of calls reporting child abuse. While referrals have steadily increased to average levels, school referrals were impacted by the absence of in-person education, and reports from law enforcement officers have significantly increased. When it comes to types of reports, there has been an increase in screen-ins with incidences of domestic violence, as well caretaker substance abuse, and lack of supervision. Domestic violence reports were significantly higher than what was reported 6 months prior to COVID-19, and slightly higher when compared to summer 2019.



“Poverty, alcoholism and depression do not cause domestic violence, but all of those factors almost always make existing abuse worse. The risk of violence may certainly increase when abusers consume alcohol and other drugs, and victims’ injuries can be more severe.”

Amanda Grady Sexton, Director of Public Affairs at NHCADSV

Access to Services

Calls for Service

Soon after the stay-at-home order was put in place the number of calls to crisis centers throughout NH fell dramatically, validating concerns that victims, now trapped at home with their abusers, had no way to seek help. Crisis centers quickly adopted new strategies to stay connected to survivors, such as online chat or text messaging services. Although initially low, calls to the statewide hotlines saw an uptick in April. Overall, the hotlines have seen an increase in call volume compared to last year. Additionally, advocates have reported more clients with substance abuse and mental health concerns, as well as an increase in male callers seeking domestic violence services. There have been more cases from [Child Advocacy Centers](#), and an influx in calls from out of state.

Housing and Economic Justice

Crisis Centers have worked diligently to develop protocols to mitigate risk and keep shelter guests safe. Shelters strive to maintain adequate social distancing in communal housing, support immuno-compromised guests, and identify additional emergency shelter options to meet the needs of all survivors. Crisis centers continue to house victims in hotels, as shelters remain at capacity. This has placed a strain on advocates who work to adapt their services to meet the needs of hotel guests, and support them with basic needs, including gas cards, phone data, groceries, rent and housing support.

New Hampshire's housing crisis has made it increasingly difficult to place survivors in transitional or permanent housing, and this has been exacerbated by the pandemic. While eviction moratoriums provide temporary relief for struggling renters, back rent will be due at the end of December, and many renters may be unable to pay. As winter approaches advocates expect escalated calls for housing support, compounded by an already heightened need as survivors continue experiencing lethal cases of domestic violence that has contributed to homelessness.

Hospital Advocacy

Hospitals have worked around the clock to provide services to victims of sexual assault throughout the pandemic. Responding to the coronavirus has not come without a toll on healthcare professionals who are experiencing heightened stress. Additionally, mitigating the risk of exposure in Emergency Departments has limited the ability of advocates to provide in-person accompaniment in most hospitals. Despite introducing remote services, [SANE nurses](#) have reported that victims are not always comfortable speaking to advocates over the phone, impacting their ability to provide follow-up services. Although teenagers have more readily connected to advocates remotely.

Court Proceedings & Criminal Legal System

Earlier on in the pandemic advocates saw an uptick in child custody issues as abusers used the virus as an excuse to not meet their custody obligations. Additionally, courts continue to prioritize hearings for domestic violence and stalking petitions, which continue to be held either in-person or telephonically. In May, the courts introduced a temporary electronic filing process for restraining orders, ensuring that survivors had access to this essential legal service. Since then nearly 80 stalking and domestic violence petitions have been filed electronically. Overall, there is a 12% decrease in the number of protective orders filed compared to 2019.

Although national news suggests that crime rates have dropped since the start of the pandemic, this may not reflect instances of domestic and sexual violence. For example, some police departments have sited an increase in [LAP screenings](#) when responding to calls involving domestic abuse. Crisis centers have also been monitoring the early release of violent offenders, and the movement to limit the number of people held pretrial. Such actions have required advocates to address the heightened safety concerns of survivors during this time.

"The biggest difficulty for people who've experienced trauma is not knowing when this is going to end, and that increases a sense of powerlessness over the situation, and that sense of powerlessness can be very reminiscent of the dangerous situation that they may have been in as a child or as an adult in an intimate partner relationship."

*Linda Douglas, Trauma-Informed Services Specialist,
NHCADSV*

Combating Violence in your Community

Crisis centers used to providing crisis intervention throughout the year have been left over-extended by the demand for service over the last few months. Advocates are under increased pressure and have limited capacity to sustain the work that is needed, especially as services shifted from providing short-term crisis intervention, to offering long-term care to survivors who desperately need stability during incredibly uncertain times.

Member programs also have fewer volunteers than normal to support with crisis counseling on the 24/7 hotline, including responding to local hospitals, police, and accompaniment to courts and emergency rooms.

Prevention Education

The important work that crisis centers do to address domestic and sexual violence prevention in their communities has been impacted as schools close, or operate remotely, community functions are canceled, and people remain in relative isolation. In response, prevention educators have adapted their curriculum to reach students remotely. It is vital that we further invest in prevention programming as financial stress and health concerns are expected to exacerbate these issues.

Funding Challenges

Member programs across the state experienced a serious loss in funding as COVID-19 forced the cancellation of many annual fundraisers. In fact, the projected total loss of revenue for all 13 organizations is over one million dollars. While several new funding sources have emerged in response to the pandemic, such funding does not cover basic operating costs, leaving crisis centers with limited unrestricted funding to cover emergency needs. As we enter a sustained pandemic, crisis centers are in dire need of unrestricted funding, which would provide the flexibility necessary to respond adaptively to the changing and increasing demands of survivors during a truly unpredictable era.

Media & Resources

- [Advocates](#): Number of abuse victims at risk of lethal violence in N.H. is rising
- [Virtual Legislative Forum](#): Impact of COVID-19 on Crisis Centers and Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence in New Hampshire
- [N.H. court data](#) shows more victims are seeking legal protections after stay-at-home order lifts
- [Our Turn](#): Domestic Violence, Substance Abuse and Addiction