

# 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 rapidly impacted nearly every facet of life in the Granite State, and among the most affected are 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 their 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 resources in their communities. Advocates play a critical role in preventing violence in their communities. However, even in the absence of a pandemic, crisis centers struggle to provide all of the services victims need. Over the last few months, supporting survivors through safety planning has grown increasingly difficult, and barriers for survivors to get help can prove deadly. Domestic violence is the most dangerous crime in New Hampshire, and the number one reason that people get murdered. In fact, 53 percent of homicide cases reported by law enforcement between 2009 and 2017 were directly related to domestic violence.

Victims of domestic and sexual violence, who were already in a state of crisis prior to the pandemic, have experienced a new set of challenges to get the support they need. Advocates are braced for a surge in service demand as the stay-at-home order has lifted, and more individuals are able to reach out for help.

The pandemic has already had grave consequences on the health and safety of survivors, and has also profoundly shaped crisis center operations. Within a matter of days, service delivery shifted from in-person advocacy to technology-based interventions. Crisis center staff swiftly sought to find new and innovative ways to connect with survivors now trapped at home with their abusers, such as chat, text and video services. 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 extended period of time.

This brief seeks to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on survivors of domestic and sexual violence in New Hampshire, and outline strategies that stakeholders can adopt moving forward so that we all are able to effectively respond to violence in our communities. Now, more than ever, survivors need our support.

*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

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

### Behavior of Abusive Partners

Mandated social isolation, compounded with the fear of getting sick, has provided new ways for abusive partners to leverage power and control. Job loss and financial instability has compounded the impact of economic abuse. This has made it increasingly harder for survivors to reach out. Most alarmingly, crisis centers have reported an increase in the lethality of cases that are being reported, suggesting that victims endure escalated violence before they are able to seek help.

### Child Abuse

Initially, the [Division of Children, Youth and Families](#) saw a drastic drop in the number of calls reporting child abuse. In April, there was a 24% increase in the number of calls, although the volume remains historically low. Alarmingly, since the start of the pandemic, there has been an increase in intakes with incidences of domestic violence, as well an increase in caretaker substance abuse and lack of supervision reported.

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## Access to 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 adopting online chat or text messaging services. By April, the statewide hotlines for domestic violence and sexual assault saw an increase in calls received compared to March. As expected, the call volume and request for services continues to climb following the expiration of the Governor's stay at home order.

## Court Proceedings

Court proceedings across the state vary by county, and hearings for new protective orders continue to be held, either in-person or telephonically. However, April saw a major decrease in new protective orders filed for both domestic violence and stalking compared to April 2019. The courts recently introduced a temporary electronic filing process for survivors to access this essential legal service. Advocates have also seen an uptick in child custody issues as abusers use the pandemic as an excuse to not meet their custody obligations.

## Finding a Safe Haven

Crisis Centers have worked around the clock to develop new protocols to help mitigate risk and keep shelter guests safe. Shelters strive to maintain adequate social distancing in communal housing, support immunocompromised guests, and identify additional emergency shelter options to meet the needs of all survivors. New Hampshire's housing crisis has made it increasingly difficult to place survivors in transitional or permanent housing, and this has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

## Mental Health & Retraumatization

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has had a severe impact on mental health and substance misuse in our communities. This can be an extra difficult time for survivors who may experience retraumatization from being trapped at home with their abusers, or from having to isolate from their support networks. It is important to utilize a trauma-informed response as a way to acknowledge the impact of COVID-19 on communities.

## Prevention Education

The important work that crisis centers do to decrease sexual violence in our communities has been impacted as schools close, community functions are canceled, and people live in isolation. It is more vital than ever that we advocate for violence prevention programming as financial stress and health concerns are expected to exacerbate these issues.

## Crime Rates

Some police departments have sited an increase in [Lethality Assessment Program \(LAP\)](#) screenings when responding to domestic disputes. Crisis centers have also been responding to the fact that jails and prisons have been called on to release violent offenders for health reasons. The risk of such releases have necessitated that advocates to develop safety plans with survivors should offenders be released. Notably, the number of newly filed domestic violence protective orders have dropped, with a 22% drop since March.

## Funding Challenges

Crisis centers across the state have experienced a serious loss in funding as COVID-19 forced many annual fundraisers to be cancelled. While several new funding sources have emerged in response to the pandemic, much of this funding is directed toward critical direct needs of victims such as lodging, food and transportation. Very little funding covers basic operating costs of the member programs. It is projected that the total loss of revenue for all 13 centers in the next several months will be over one million dollars.

## Conclusion

As advocates brace for a surge in demand for services, we know the true impact of the pandemic is yet to be seen. The coming months will determine the on-going needs of survivors and resources available at the community, state, and federal level.

## 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

*In the past, Bridges would accompany two to three families a day at our local child advocacy center if there was suspected child sexual abuse or serious domestic violence. We had [only] two interviews in the last 4 to 6 weeks, and that's a significant decrease. - Dawn Reams, Executive Director at Bridges*