

Domestic Violence and Veterans: An Increasing Problem

The Rev. Bonnie M. Orth

Domestic violence is a pattern of controlling, abusive, or violent behaviors used with an intimate partner. It may be physical, emotional or psychological, sexual, verbal, or financial and may include isolating the victim, minimizing, denying, blaming, and using children to control the victim. It is an issue of power and control, not of anger and losing control. Domestic violence happens in all communities and crosses all social, economic, and cultural borders. While 90 to 95% of domestic violence victims are female, there are also male victims.

Domestic violence is becoming an increasing problem for war veterans and their families. In a 2009 article from WeNews entitled, "Veteran Domestic Violence Remains Camouflaged," commentator Stacey Bannerman writes, "Domestic violence among veterans has reached historic frequency." Helen Benedict writes in her new book, The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq, "... post-traumatic stress disorder rates appear to be higher among Iraq war veterans than among those who have served in Afghanistan or even, many believe, in Vietnam. One of the symptoms of this disorder is uncontrollable violence."

Estimates of the rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among veterans returning from Iraq range from 12% to 20% with less than half of those seeking help. The effect on families also is great. According to a paper presented at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, "You see more marital problems, more behavioral problems in children, more family violence, and the potential for the generational transmission of violence." (American Public Health Association 135th Annual Meeting: Abstract 165759.)

According to The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research, veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are two to three times more likely to batter their spouses, partners, families, and children than veterans without PTSD. In addition, there are large numbers of veterans with traumatic brain injuries and substance abuse disorders, as well as veterans who are victims of military sexual trauma, largely unreported, both male and female. These are all separate problems.

Treating PTSD does not mean that the domestic violence will stop. Each problem must be addressed individually. The VA works with veterans dealing with PTSD, brain injuries, and substance abuse disorders. However, domestic violence is dealt with on a community level by community agencies. Community agencies and VA's are learning that they must find ways to collaborate and coordinate treatment and care in order to help victims and families.

The Military Power and Control Wheel at http://www.ncdsv.org/publications_wheel.html developed from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota highlights specific issues of power and control that may be unique to military folks. This wheel is a helpful tool for victims and abusers and identifies the most common behaviors that abusers use against their victims. In addition to the Power and Control Wheel, there is also an Equality Wheel which describes changes necessary to move to non-violence. You may find more information on the Duluth Model at www.theduluthmodel.org

What can you and your church do to help veterans and families dealing with domestic violence?

- You can educate yourself about domestic violence and then provide ways for members of your congregation to learn.
- You can get resources for use by your church from PADVN, Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network, at www.pcusa.org/phewa/padvn
- Your church can become a safe place where victims and families can come for help.
- Your pastors can receive training in how to respond best and help victims of domestic violence. After training, we encourage them to break the silence and talk about domestic violence from the pulpit, offering prayers for victims and families, using a domestic violence illustration in a sermon and, if they feel comfortable, preaching about domestic violence. PADVN encourages all trained pastors to preach about domestic violence annually and to offer victims and perpetrators of domestic violence up in prayer on a regular basis.
- Your church can display brochures and posters which include telephone numbers of the domestic violence and sexual assault programs in your area and publicize the National Domestic Violence Hotline number 1-800-799-SAFE(7233) or 1-800-799-3224 (TDD).
- You can reach out to your local domestic violence agency and ask how your church can help them.

For more information on domestic violence, or if you are interested in having PADVN offer a training at your church, contact PADVN at www.pcusa.org/phewa/padvn

The Rev. Bonnie M. Orth is a member of the Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network of the Presbyterian Health, Education & Welfare Association (PHEWA).