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SPA Leadership

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Policy Memo

I. Research Question

If, in the past, domestic violence rates have spiked when people have stayed at home for extended periods of time, could we then anticipate an increase in the domestic violence rate amid the coronavirus lockdown?

II. Executive Summary

While our research has shown that domestic violence rates have spiked when people have stayed at home for extended periods, the same trend is impacting current rates of domestic violence amid the COVID-19 lockdown and general pandemic. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration report high rates of intimate partner violence and child abuse in the United States before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, due to living in reduced space for extended periods, rates of “intimate terrorism” and domestic violence as a whole have increased (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration 1). This trend informs the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence rates have increased worldwide, putting families, especially women and children, at an increased risk. Past trends of times when people have stayed at home for extended periods helps to inform the solutions to the current increase in rates of domestic violence.

III. Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, families were forced to stay indoors for extended periods with little connection to others. This situation set abusive partners up in a way that enabled them greater control over their partners and families, while simultaneously taking away resources from the survivors. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly increased trends of domestic violence not just in the United States, but instead, all over the world. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) states that intimate partner violence impacts approximately 1 in 4 women and close to 1 in 10 men. Intimate partner violence includes sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 1).

In the United States, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline saw a 25 percent increase in calls at the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020 (Donagh). The key connections of COVID-19 and domestic violence are the “economic instability, an inability for women and children to escape their abuser, and quarantine and with it inherent social isolation” for women and families (Øverlien). Researcher Judith Lewis Herman at Harvard University Medical School draws a connection between “the coercive methods domestic abusers use to control their partners and children” to “those kidnappers use to control hostages and repressive regimes use to break the will of political prisoners” (Taub). Further, this abuse is not always physical, and during the pandemic, this can look like creating isolation, increased surveillance, and restrictions on partners. The support system families relied on has disappeared due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The stay-at-home order dissolved family childcare support such as extended family, traditional child care and schools, religious groups, and other community organizations (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 3).

Additionally, it is important to recognize the institutionality of domestic violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, racial tensions increased along with distrust in the social system of police, these shifts also impacted rates of domestic violence by removing additional protection and resources for survivors. Domestic violence is wrapped up with police violence and racial tensions, therefore as these dynamics changed nationally the relationship with domestic violence was more difficult to manage and additional outside resources needed to enter the conversation.

IV. Key Stakeholders

A. National Resources:

1. *The National Domestic Violence Hotline* is a 24/7 hotline that provides resources and essential tools to help survivors of domestic violence. These resources aim to help survivors of domestic violence live free of abuse. The Hotline has ‘highly-trained, expert advocates to offer free, confidential, and compassionate support, crisis intervention information, education, and referral services in over 200 languages’ (National Domestic Violence Hotline).
2. The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) is a comprehensive resource providing information to those wanting to help themselves and others on the issue of domestic violence. This organization takes a special focus on looking at the pandemic of racial injustice, systemic oppression, and exploitation across the country as it intersects with domestic violence.

3. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) is a centralized database for other resources for survivors of domestic violence.

B. Washington, D.C. Resources:

1. *My Sister's Place* is a shelter in DC that supports and empowers survivors of domestic violence and their children, while simultaneously, providing leadership and education to construct a supportive community.
2. *DC Safe* is an organization in DC that is a 24/7 crisis intervention agency in the Washington DC area for survivors of domestic violence.
3. *DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence* is an organization with the primary goal of addressing the safety, health, and well-being of survivors of domestic violence. This organization has adapted its resources amid the current pandemic.

C. Academics in Washington, D.C.

1. *Ian Harris* is a professor at American University and the Washington College of Law. Ian Harris works with the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) as the Technology Safety Legal Manager. He has spent his career working with survivors in both New York and Washington, D.C.
2. *Deborah Epstein* is a professor at Georgetown University Law since 1993 and the Director of Domestic Violence Clinic through Georgetown University Law. Deborah Epstein co-chaired the DC Superior Court's effort to design and implement a Domestic Violence Division.

V. Appraisal of Past Solutions

Following disaster and times of stress, domestic violence rates tend to rise. Below I will examine prior instances where domestic violence rates spiked and the areas for improvement and success.

A. The Aftermath of Hurricane Andrews in 1992.

1. Following Hurricane Andrew that hit Miami, Florida in 1992, the United States Center for Disease Control found that out of 1,400 nearly one-third of surveyed residents reported that someone in their home had lost verbal or physical control in the two months since the hurricane (Anurudran et al.). In this case, there was a high demand for increased access to housing.

B. The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

1. Hurricane Katrina which hit New Orleans in 2005 caused four shelters and two non-residential programs to close due to damage. During this time many advocates reported that women were experiencing violence by their partners in the emergency shelters. In the four months following the hurricane, there were “38 rape cases reported to women’s services that initiated documentation projects to capture sexual assaults of disaster-displaced women” (Zara, et al.). The hurricane “displaced thousands of poor and African American women into temporary camps where one survey found that rape rates since displacement were triple the nationally expected rape rate” (Zara, et al.). This case study shows the need to create spaces of escape and safety for women in the wake of a natural disaster.

C. The Aftermath of the Loma Prieta Earthquake in Santa Cruz, CA.

1. After the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, the director of a battered women's shelter in Santa Cruz reported that the requests for temporary restraining orders rose by nearly 50 percent due to housing shortages that prevented women from leaving abusive partners. The director stated that "when the community considers replacement housing issues, battered women should not be overlooked" (Zara, et al.). This problem persisted in the following months following the earthquake. In March, nearly five months after the earthquake, a survey conducted by the United Way of over "300 service providers ranked 'protective services for women, children, and elderly' sixth among 41 community services most unavailable to residents" (Zara, et al.). The report also saw the sexual assault rise by nearly 300 percent. Once again, housing was a critical issue, however, an increase in community building spaces for women could have greatly helped women.

D. The Work of DC SAFE During the Beginning Waves of the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Traditionally, DC SAFE serves women in the Washington DC metropolitan area who experience domestic violence and aid them in navigating legal systems for protection and access to social services. According to Natalia Otero, founder and executive director of DC SAFE, the organization primarily serves low-income black women in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia area. Before the pandemic, the majority of these women consistently relied upon other systems to support them on a day-to-day basis and to stay safe. However, COVID-19 disrupted many

of these systems initially, and now accessing these systems is different than it initially was before the start of the pandemic. It became increasingly difficult for women to leave their homes when a partner was being abusive because their livelihood depended on that person in the absence of the lack of these other social support systems. To respond to the rising need, DC SAFE moved online and created a portal for women that was easily accessible to fill out the necessary paperwork to access legal protection and necessary social programs. Shifting resources online increased the number of people accessing the resources through DC SAFE. There was a greater number of people accessing the resources, however, of that percentage, a greater number of the survivors were in relatively less dangerous living situations. In other words, the people coming in were in lower-risk situations. This demonstrates one of the areas that need greater attention and consideration.

VI. Project Plan

Given all that I have learned in my research thus far, I am seeking to work on a social action project that prompts social awareness for the rising rates of domestic violence amid the COVID-19 pandemic as well as policy action to directly help survivors. Due to the virtual setting and the limitations, this creates, I intend to do a public awareness campaign on key social media platforms that helps people to better understand how domestic violence exists in their communities. I hope that this public awareness campaign can also be easily reproduced and distributed on social media by many people to reach a broader audience, and potentially reach individuals who could be experiencing violence by an intimate partner in their home situation

during the pandemic. Additionally, as elected officials set their legislative priorities in early 2021, I hope to reach out to my elected officials and encourage them to include protective measures for survivors of domestic violence in the next COVID-19 aid package and following policy initiatives. I am hoping that these two aspects of the project have the potential to impact local and national change for survivors of domestic violence.

VII. Conclusion

Overall, there is strong evidence that suggests that domestic violence rates have spiked when people have stayed at home for extended periods. Additionally, evidence suggests the same trend is currently impacting rates of domestic violence amid the COVID-19 lockdown and general pandemic. This is a difficult time for all individuals being confined to their homes, however, for individuals living with abusive partners this can be unbearable and in many cases has resulted in a homicide. There is a clear need to address this problem to reach a broad audience to impact the greatest change. Through our background research and in-depth analysis of past solutions, we have concluded that to best address the rise of domestic violence rates it is necessary to help individuals experiencing the violence first-hand, as well as a legislative change to impact a broader audience. This social action plan should hopefully enable greater resources to survivors in domestic violence living situations as they leave.

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