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Calls linked to domestic violence fall in county

But demand for victim services is up, data show

By Kathleen Wilson (Contact)
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Calls to police alleging domestic violence have fallen in Ventura County and the state, while the demand for victim services is rising.

Some are confounded by the decline, while others believe it reflects the fact that some victims are getting enough help from community agencies to avoid calls to the police.

"Since about the mid-'90s, there has been a lot more attention, a lot more awareness and a lot more resources to help victims of domestic violence," said Nancy Matson, director of the state Department of Justice's Crime and Violence Prevention Center. "Law enforcement and prosecutors also have put additional resources in to hold batterers accountable."

Newly released data collected by the state Department of

Justice show:

- Police received about 7,200 calls related to domestic violence last year in Ventura County, a decline of about 10 percent from 2003. The same rate of decline was seen in the state as a whole, with California calls down from 194,000 to 176,000. An unknown number of those calls reflect verbal fights that do not result in arrests rather than physical abuse.

- When only the most serious calls were considered, the number dropped in Ventura County from 1,600 to close to 1,100 over the four-year period. Those calls reflect use of weapons or bodily force resulting in substantial injury such as cuts and broken bones. The state figures were down as well, falling from 107,000 to 81,000.

- Statewide, arrests in 2006 for spousal abuse fell to their lowest levels since 1990, at just under 44,000 for both adults and juveniles. The crime reflects deliberate corporal injury involving married people as well as people who are cohabitating. Such arrests have been relatively flat this decade in Ventura County, totaling 900 to 1,000 annually.

- California homicides occurring in a domestic violence-related incident fell from 187 in 2003 to 141 last year.

Ventura County officials are seeing rising numbers of cases being referred for possible prosecution and victim assistance.

"I can't explain why 911 calls are down," said Catherine Duggan, director of crime victims assistance in the District Attorney's Office. "I can't explain why arrests are down."

Many don't file report

More than 3,000 domestic violence victims come to Duggan's office each year for help, a number that has grown by 23 percent over the past five years, she said. Often they need help in getting a

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restraining order after a violent event, she said.

Many, though, never make a crime report and have no interest in doing so, she said.

Domestic violence cases referred by police agencies for review and possible prosecution are rising, said Anthony Wold, who oversees the sexual assault and family protection unit in the District Attorney's Office. Those cases totaled 1,550 in the first six months of 2007, up by more than 200 from the same period last year, he said.

Domestic violence has long been a secret in many households, a fact that providers say may be influencing the rate at which people are calling for help from police.

"In general, we do know that domestic violence and sexual assault crimes are the most underreported crimes in the U.S., so we can't completely rely on the decline," said Marivic Mabanag, executive director of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence.

Owning the problem

A real solution will take a united front, she said.

"Everyone has to own the problem and feel they have something at stake," she said.

Ventura County District Attorney Greg Totten portrayed domestic violence as an epidemic in an address at a conference Thursday at the Courtyard Marriott in Oxnard.

In an interview after his speech, Totten also said that the trend statewide and nationally indicates there are fewer calls to police for domestic violence. Families may be dealing with the problem in another way or not at all, he said.

Totten and other speakers said law enforcement, communities, medical and social service providers must join together to make a real difference. One problem is that the county has a serious shortage of shelter beds and transitional living facilities for victims, Totten said.

"I cannot as a prosecutor overstate the importance of these beds," he told the crowd of 150 attending the conference presented by the Ventura County Partnership for Safe Families and Communities.

"We need to make it a priority to provide housing."

Cherie Duval, president and CEO of the Coalition to End Family Violence, agreed that housing is critical to dealing with domestic violence.

"I think that if we don't get some housing in Ventura County, it is only going to get worse," she said in an interview this week.

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