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October marks domestic violence month

By: Alyssa Lofgren

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October marks the 20th annual National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a time committed to creating awareness about domestic violence against women, men and children.

The first national domestic violence awareness month was October 1987, which also marked the creation of the first national toll-free domestic violence hotline.

"Domestic violence touches us all," said Camille Hayes, membership and communications coordinator at the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence. "As people are increasingly aware of the prevalence and cost of this problem, it's also important to let the public know about events in their community they can attend to get information about services and other matters relating to the issue."

About 5.3 million incidents of domestic violence occurred in 2006 among U.S. women ages 18 and older, and 3.2 million incidents occur among men, the Center for Disease Control website shows.

Domestic violence is often underrepresented in the media, as there's a negative stigma associated with both victims and perpetrators.

Emily Janes, training facilitator at the Haven Hills Shelter in Canoga Park, said that domestic violence is one of the least discussed issues in society because people don't really have a firm understanding of domestic violence.

Extreme cases, such as the case involving O.J. Simpson and Nicole Brown, attract the most media attention because of celebrity involvement. People tend not to recognize more prevalent violence such as verbal abuse

and domestic violence.

"Domestic violence is not a familiar issue because it is so complex. The people who stay in abusive situations are judged by people who don't understand that it's not as easy as leaving. There are financial ramifications, threats to friends and family, and sacrifices of personal safety," Janes said. "It's too hard for society to deal with all of that because it's much easier for the media to think, 'Is Nicole Richie pregnant?'"

Men are even more unlikely to report violence, as it seems far more uncommon for men to be battered, but statistics show domestic violence against men has been consistent.

Marc Angelucci, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Coalition of Free Men, a nonprofit organization that examines sex discrimination among men, said, "Virtually all randomized sociological research from around the globe shows men are at least half of domestic violence victims and one-third of injured victims. That's with no outreach and with most referral services not even sending them to shelters. So the problem is very hidden."

Angelucci said only two shelters exist in California that serve male domestic violence victims as well as female. In the past, many domestic violence shelters would even train their staff to treat all male callers as perpetrators no matter what the circumstances, Angelucci said.

Martin Fiebert at Cal State Long Beach said the mass media often contributes to this neglect of male victims by framing domestic violence only as "battered women" or primarily as male crime, and by citing inaccurate data.

Many officials at various domestic violence awareness agencies have suggested that data can sometimes be skewed because there are so many unreported instances of domestic violence.

"Both sexes underreport domestic violence, but men underreport more. They prefer to keep it private. They feel ashamed. They fear losing custody of children or of being falsely arrested," Angelucci said. "There just hasn't been the 40 years of national outreach and services to men that we have given to women. These biases are changing, but only very slowly."

"Men are reporting at a higher rate than was true in the past, as are women," Hayes said. "We strongly believe that every victim of domestic violence should have access to the range of support service available in his or her community."

Joseph Miranda is a part-time professor of criminal justice at Chapman University, a graduate student and a member of the National Coalition for Free Men

"We find a lot of problems with getting active with this issue," Miranda said. "We're supposed to be against sexism and for equal rights, but it baffles me that this is still an issue."

"We have to start recognizing that everyone should be treated equally when it comes to criminal justice, but at the same time, everyone should be treated to their rights," Miranda said.

Advocates of domestic violence awareness recommend that anybody who feels unsafe in a relationship should consider counseling and calling a hotline in which they can remain anonymous. If the victim is in danger, it's advisable to call the police.

Male victims in Los Angeles County who need shelter should contact the Lancaster-based Valley Oasis Hotline at (661) 945-6736.

A women's center is available at CSUN, offering education, support and referrals for various services. The

CSUN women's center can be reached at (818) 677-2780.

CSUN also has a hotline at (818) 349-HELP, extension 4357, that provides crisis assistance, emotional support, referrals and information seven nights a week from 6 p.m. to midnight.

There's also a national gender-neutral hotline, The Domestic Abuse Hotline for Men and Women, available 24 hours a day at 1-888-7HELPLINE.

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