

How do you keep abuse victims safe?

Topic discussed during Thursday forum at NCI

By PAUL COLLINS

MARTINSVILLE — Some members of a panel discussing domestic violence Thursday night said they feel a protective order is just a piece of paper, but

others said they feel protective orders help prevent further violence to victims.

However, all seemed to agree that a protective order is "not bullet-proof vest," as some panelists put it, if a defendant is determined to injure or kill a domestic violence victim.

The nearly two-hour panel discussion, called "Community Conversations," kicked off Domes-

tic Violence Awareness Month.

The panel discussion was held at New College Institute's building on the Baldwin Block and was sponsored by New College Institute, The Law Office of Heath Sabin, Southside Survivor Response Center and the Longwood School of Social Work at NCI.

Warren Rodgers Jr., executive director of South-

side Survivor Response Center Inc., opened by mentioning what brought about the forum, the murder of 53-year-old Kathy Likens. The Martinsville resident was killed the night of July 12.

After conducting a ground search, Martinsville police found her body July 13 in a wooded area between Ellsworth Street and Cleveland Avenue in

Martinsville about 4:25 p.m. that same day.

On July 15, 52-year-old Martinsville resident Robert Wayne Reynolds was arrested on a charge of first-degree murder of Likens.

According to documents in Martinsville General District Court and Martinsville Circuit Court, Likens requested and received a protective order July 11

against Reynolds. In the criminal complaint, Likens alleged that Reynolds, who she had previously dated, told her he would kill her, that he was going to use a hammer when he did it and that she feared for her safety after being verbally attacked by him at her job.

On July 14, the medical examiner's office declared

See VICTIMS, Page A3

VICTIMS

From Page A3

that the cause of Likens' death was blunt force trauma to the head.

At the event Thursday night, Rodgers held a moment of silence to honor the life of Likens "and all those who have lost their lives due to domestic violence."

The U.S. Department of Justice "defines domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Rodgers told the crowd that domestic violence isn't always physical.

"Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure or wound someone," he said.

Rodgers added: "As an organization, we envision a community that is empowered to end sexual and domestic violence and also equipped to respond to various crisis situations. We seek to fulfill this mission by providing crisis intervention, advocacy, safety services and education to empower people affected by domestic violence sexual assault and various crisis situations through community collaboration.

In the United States, domestic violence is an alarming and pervasive problem that doesn't discriminate young from old, Rodgers said. He noted that studies show that in this nation one in four women and one in seven men experience physical abuse by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime with the majority of victimizations occurring at home.

"This makes home not the place of peace and tranquility that it should offer. This also makes it affect everyone in the home, including children," Rodgers said.

When children are exposed to domestic violence, they are often physically, mentally and emotion-

ally impacted, Rodgers added. That means they may be more prone to dating violence, delinquency, further victimization, and involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Exposure to violence may also impair a child's capacity for partnering and parenting later in life, continuing the cycle of violence into the next generation.

Overall in the last year, Southside Survivor Response Center helped 440 women, 130 children and 84 men, responding to more than 300 calls each month. And yet, Rodgers said, the group members know they don't scratch the surface of the problem in the localities being served.

Panelists included Lt. Sandy Hines of the Martinsville Police Department; Capt. Troy Easter of the Henry County Sheriff's Office; Martinsville Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Paula Bowen; Ann Hylton, chief magistrate for the 21st Judicial District; Cindy Eberhardt from Bassett Family Practice; Lisa Smith of Community Recovery Program; Julia Scales, domestic violence victim advocate for Southside Survivor Response Center; and Felecia Watkins, director of emergency services for Southside Survivor Response Center.

Heath Sabin, vice president of the board of directors of Southside Survivor Response Center, moderated the discussion, asking a variety of questions, including some taken via index card from attendees.

The panelists described the various services they or their agencies provide to domestic violence victims and the extent to which they are able to cooperate with other agencies (if domestic violence victims give permission).

Among the challenges panelists mentioned are domestic violence victims being reluctant to press charges or follow through once charges are filed. Police officers said they are required to file charges if they can determine the predominant aggressor, which they may or may not be able to do. Magistrates are required to file charges if there is probable cause the crime has been committed and the victim is credible. Victims may be reluctant to file or

follow through on charges because they love their intimate partner; they have children with their partner; they depend on their partner for financial support; they fear for their or their children's safety; they fear going to court; they grew up in a home where there was domestic violence was part of life.

Some domestic violence victims won't give one helping agency permission to share confidential information with another helping agency in an effort to get the victim more help.

Once a domestic violence case goes to court, a victim may try to recant.

Some panelists cited the need for more community education on domestic violence and healthy relationships, continued training for law enforcement, the need for training for faith leaders to help deal with domestic violence.

One question was whether allowing domestic violence victims to carry guns would help the situation or make matters worse. Panelists' opinions varied. Some said it might help if the domestic violence victim knew how to use the weapon, or took a firearm training class and perhaps self-defense class, and was willing to accept the consequences for using the gun. Some said no, the perpetrator might get the victim's gun and use it on the victim.

Del. Les Adams, the only one of this area's state legislators to attend, though all were invited, asked a number of questions.

About 15-20 observers attended the panel discussion.

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