

LAS Gives Domestic Violence Victims Hope

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year and one in four women will experience domestic violence during her lifetime. [Read 15 Signs Someone Might Be Dangerous](#)

Domestic violence destroys families, disrupts communities and deeply affects the children involved. Studies show that the most effective way to end the cycle of abuse is to help victims become independent of their abusers. However, low-income victims often remain in abusive marriages or relationships because they can't afford the legal assistance needed to get a divorce and/or order of protection.

That's where the Legal Aid Society steps in. In 2010, the Legal Aid Society handled 1,747 cases of domestic violence and helped 1,473 individuals seek and enforce their legal rights.

"Victims of abuse face challenges you and I cannot imagine," said Jean Crowe of the Legal Aid Society. "In the midst of this terror, it can often seem to the victim like the law is stacked against her. Having a good lawyer who understands your situation and has dealt with these situations before can make all the difference in the world."

The Legal Aid Society (LAS) has helped people like *Mary Edwards and her two sons—one of whom has cerebral palsy—who were victims of some of the most horrific domestic violence incidents ever reported to the Legal Aid Society's Murfreesboro office. Family members' injuries included multiple broken bones: knee, noses, teeth and ankles. The evidence of abuse was so apparent Mary's husband prevented her and the children from contacting relatives and seeking medical treatment.

Fearing for her life and her children's safety, Mary had her husband arrested in the state where she formerly lived and escaped to Tennessee. Terrified that once her husband was released from jail he would force the family to return home, Mary came

to the Legal Aid Society for help in obtaining a divorce, which pro bono (volunteer) attorneys did free of charge. Today, Mary and her sons live in a stable home, safe from her abusive former husband.

Many women like Mary and their children endure severe, unrelenting domestic violence. Crowe estimates about 99 percent of the cases opened each year by her practice group, Family Law, are related to domestic violence—and many instances go unreported. Less than one-fifth of victims seek medical treatment after they are injured.

“At a certain income level, victims just don’t report it because they feel that there is absolutely nowhere to turn,” said Crowe. “The Legal Aid Society was created for people who have nowhere else to turn for help, and we encourage them to step forward to start changing their lives for the better.”

Crowe emphasizes that getting out of an abusive relationship and getting to safety is the first priority. The Legal Aid Society starts the process by helping victims get an Order of Protection against the abuser.

A 2009 study in Kentucky submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice determined that a civil Order of Protection is worth the cost of obtaining and enforcing the orders. While there are costs to obtaining an order of protection, the study found that they are overshadowed by the significant reduction in costs after an order of protection has been issued. The average tax payer savings was \$4,665.54 per case in health services, mental health services, victim services, legal fees, police and justice system, employment and lost earnings, transportation and lost property. This means there is a significant tax dollar savings in other costs to the state for every dollar invested in the Legal Aid Society’s work and advocacy.

“Studies show that an Order of Protection reduces further violence and translate to future tax dollar savings,” she added. “Once signed, the Order of Protection says that batterers must have no contact with the victim. If they violate the order, they can be arrested immediately.”

But the Legal Aid Society hopes to stop domestic violence before it gets to this stage.

“Information is key. Seeing those early warning signs of abusive personalities can save someone’s life,” said Adinah Robertson, community education coordinator for

Legal Aid Society. “We hope that our educational materials and outreach will help young people to enter relationships cautiously in order to establish healthy, stable family lives in the future.”

The Legal Aid Society provides free information booklets, posters and wallet cards on domestic violence as well as information about the counseling services available to families and teens. The organization informs teens and local school guidance counselors to recognize the 15 warning signs of abusive personalities (see attached sheet). These resources are available at www.las.org or by calling (615) 780-7108.

“Our goal is to offer legal assistance and information to victims of violence that will help victims and increase their long term safety and independence from their abusers,” said Gary Housepian, executive director of Legal Aid Society. “We want to raise awareness during Domestic Violence Month and let victims know that there is hope through the Legal Aid Society.”

The Legal Aid Society gives free civil legal aid to people who have nowhere else to turn. It serves 48 counties from offices in Clarksville, Columbia, Cookeville, Gallatin, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Oak Ridge, and Tullahoma. The Legal Aid Society is funded in part by United Way.

**We have changed the client’s name to Mary Edwards to maintain anonymity.*

About Jean Crowe

Jean Crowe is an attorney for the Legal Aid Society as well as a national and state leader in the field of domestic violence. She leads several of the American Bar Association’s committees and initiatives in the field. In Tennessee, she is a member of the Executive Council and Code Commission of the Tennessee Bar Association’s Domestic Relations Committee. In Nashville, she helped found the Domestic Death Review Team and currently serves as the chairman. Additionally, Crowe is the Chair of the Board of Directors for the Nashville Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

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