

Domestic Violence Among Older Adults

"I felt trapped by him in our home of 44 years. He insisted on keeping the curtains drawn and the doors locked. He wanted my full attention 24 hours a day. If I left the house, I knew I'd pay the price when I returned."

-Carol, age 68

The incidence of domestic violence among older adults is on the rise, which should come as no surprise given our nation's aging demographic. Every year, more and more older women contact The Women's Resource Center inquiring about services. In 2009, 15 percent of the women seeking emergency shelter and 11 percent of calls to our 24-hour crisis hotline were women ages 50 and above. These numbers are expected to increase over time.

In response, The Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley is leading domestic violence organizations across the Commonwealth of Virginia in studying the needs of older victims of Intimate Partner Violence and creating specialized services to best meet the needs of this population.

Intimate Partner Violence is physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual abuse by a husband, boyfriend, or other intimate partner. Although Intimate Partner Violence affects women of all ages, older victims are unique in their coping strategies and their service needs. A study conducted by Virginia Tech's Center for Gerontology in partnership with The Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley concluded the following. (See page 3 for further information on this research.)

- » Older women feel a great deal of shame and embarrassment, and often keep their abuse hidden from family and friends at the expense of their health and happiness.
- » Older women often love and care about the person harming them, and may have a relationship with the person that spans many decades.
- » Staying with the abuser may be more important to older victims, for personal or religious reasons.
- » Older victims may fear that leaving means the loss of a lifetime of precious treasures and memories, or parting with a cherished pet.
- » Poor health and disabilities may make living independently very challenging for an older victim.



Domestic violence can strike women of all ages, but the needs of victims over age 50 are quite different.

Carol's Story, below, provides a glimpse into the very real difficulties faced by one particular older victim, and how she made use of the services offered by the Women's Resource Center.

Carol's Story

Her husband had always been possessive of her, but when he retired things got much worse. He never left the house—always keeping watch over her and her activities. He sold their car, so that Carol had to rely on friends for transportation to church and the grocery store. Whenever she returned after being out, the questions were relentless. He kept the drapes pulled and the house dark. She felt trapped.

When she came home on the day before Thanksgiving to find him waiting in a kitchen chair with his hunting rifle, she froze. Her mind was blank as he fired shots into the ceiling. He was surrounded by her prized quilting projects, all ripped and strewn around the room. He got up and yelled insults about her appearance and stormed around the house in a rage.

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From the Executive Director

Women's Resource Center Visioning Event



On November 10, 2010, thirty-six people gathered to hold a Community Visioning Event for The Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley. The event was designed to solicit broad yet organized input from our Board of Directors, staff, and key community stakeholders on current services, future directions, and specific challenges. Over the course of three hours, participants discussed domestic violence, sexual assault, and prevention/education efforts. The outcomes of this event were eye-opening for me and others who make critical decisions about the organization—what we provide, who we reach, and how we go about our work. Some clear themes could be teased out:

- » The population of victims increasingly includes older and disabled adults.
- » Victims present with more complex health and social issues today than in years past.
- » Advances in communication technology are impacting all aspects of the work performed by the organization.
- » Prevention efforts should be expanded across the life-span.
- » Partnerships and collaborations are essential, as one organization can't do it all.

So this is where we focus. No doubt we must modify our programs to better educate and serve younger and older populations, collaborate with a multitude of other local human service organizations, and embrace technology and social networking as tools for outreach, education, and community relations. All this must be accomplished while prioritizing services that meet basic human needs for safety, housing, and dignity. We wanted a Visioning Event, and that's what we got. Quite a vision, yes. But one we're anxious to pursue and realize.

In Peace,

Pat Brown
Executive Director

Carol's Story *(continued from page 1)*

Note to readers: Carol volunteered to recount her experience for this publication, in hopes that readers will better understand the special challenges facing older victims of domestic violence. Her name and other identifying information have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality and ensure safety.

She left early Thanksgiving morning, before dawn, with a long-time girlfriend in whom she had confided. The year before, the pastor at church had told her about The Women's Resource Center, and that they had a safe place if she ever needed to protect herself. She phoned the crisis hotline from a gas station, and was given the address of their emergency shelter. She stayed on the phone with the hotline counselor until she arrived at the door.

She looked around at the other residents, most in their 20's and 30's, some with little children. She felt out of place, and barely uttered a word to anyone for at least a week. Slowly, slowly, she started interacting with the shelter staff and cooking for herself and others in the shelter kitchen. She felt at home in the kitchen, and other residents seemed to appreciate her country cooking.

After three weeks, Carol began to attend an on-site support group for older abuse survivors. Together, the ladies explored their feelings of loss and loneliness. Carol explained that she had a collection of cut glass vases—collected over a lifetime—and that she knew they would be destroyed or sold when she fled. She had been married to one person for decades, so loneliness was very real. Her group also discussed the practical problems of health care for their many chronic conditions, and the logistics of life on your own when you're an older person.

Now, after five weeks in the shelter, Carol has located an affordable apartment and is looking forward to settling into her new surroundings. Her out-of-state niece brought her some furniture that had been in the family, so at least a few things in her new life will be familiar. Legal battles loom, but she hopes someday to be independent of her abuser, living a full and peaceful life. Carol smiles and says, "I'll continue to come to the shelter for my group, and to work with the Center's legal advocate when my court date draws near. And I can't just abandon these younger girls. I need to provide them with a role model for courage. After all they've done for my self-esteem, I want to give back."

Women's Resource Center and Virginia Tech Collaborate on Research Project Focused on Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Aging Women

In the Fall of 2008, the National Institute of Health awarded a two-year grant to the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Tech and The Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley, for a project entitled, "Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Aging Women: Promoting Community Knowledge." The purpose of the project was to study the community's readiness to address the needs of older women (ages 50+) who are victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and to develop an intervention model based upon this research.

The study was led by Karen A. Roberto, Professor and Director of the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Tech. The study identified several areas of concern. Both professional groups and community members were found to lack awareness and understanding of IPV in older victims, and professionals rarely screened for IPV. Victims of IPV were often not aware of domestic violence services or believed that these services were not appropriate for them. In addition, strong community networks that will be necessary to address the multi-faceted needs of older victims were found to be lacking.

The intervention model that was developed includes increased outreach and awareness efforts in the community, ongoing training on IPV in orientations for direct service providers, developing collaborative agreements for multi-agency cooperation, and providing support/social networking groups specific to older women.

This project was supported by award #RO3HD059478 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver NICHD and the NIH Office of the Director (OD). For more information about the research go to www.gerontology.vt.edu.

Did you know... A New River Valley Task Force on Domestic Violence Among Older Adults is chaired by the Women's Resource Center Community Outreach Coordinator, Mary Beth Pulsifer. This Task Force began meeting in 2005 and has met quarterly ever since. The goals of the Task Force are to identify and prioritize current and potential initiatives relevant to elder abuse in the New River Valley and to coordinate activities that focus on older victims. The specific contribution of the Women's Resource Center is around the issue of Intimate Partner Violence among older adults.

Women's Resource Center by the Numbers

Service Delivery Statistics for the period July 2009-June 2010

View our complete Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2009-10 on our website at www.wrcnr.org

Hotline Crisis Calls (incoming)	1,707
Domestic Violence Victims Served	2,477
Sexual Assault Victims Served	1,365
Legal Advocacy Clients Served	994
Educational Presentations	814
Adults Sheltered	157
Children Sheltered	148
Adult Sexual Assault Victims	398
Child Sexual Abuse Victims	431
Emergency Advocacy Calls to Hospitals & Child Advocacy Ctr.	199
Volunteers	475
# of Employees	25
# of Board Meetings Held	8



If you or someone you know is a victim of Intimate Partner Violence, contact the Women's Resource Center by calling the crisis hotline at 540-639-1123 or toll free at 800-788-1123. You can speak with an advocate on the phone without giving your name. They will listen, help you develop a plan for safety, and offer a variety of other services that may be helpful. The crisis hotline operates 24 hours a day. Translators are available via Language Lines for non-English speaking callers. In addition, a TTY machine is available to assist the deaf or hard of hearing at 540-639-2197.



24-Hour Crisis Hotline: 540.639.1123

Office: 540.639.9592
E-mail: director@wrcnr.org
www.wrcnr.org

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Report for Fiscal Year 2009-2010 is now
available on our website at
www.wrcnrv.org.

Look inside for a statistical snapshot of our
year at the Women's Resource Center.

If you would prefer to receive our newsletter
electronically, please contact us at
administration@wrcnrv.org