

**TODAY'S TOPIC:** | WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT HIGH DOMESTIC-VIOLENCE FATALITIES?

## Domestic-abuse deaths high in TN

### Violence follows pattern that many fail to see

By Pamela Sessions

A recent *Tennessean* article reported that our state ranks fifth in the nation for the number of women murdered by men. This research also establishes that 95 percent of these women were murdered by someone they knew, including a current or previous partner. Domestic violence comes in many forms, and is at the most extreme end of the spectrum.



Sessions

Given the dynamics of domestic violence, it is likely that before this final act of violence was committed, there was a progression of abusive behavior used to establish power and control over the victim. Typically, this control starts out slowly and increases. By the time physical abuse occurs, there is already a pattern of verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. Abusive individuals also tend to isolate their victims, limiting what they do and who they see.

This means that in those cases where a woman was murdered by her abusive partner or former partner, there were probably signs (maybe very subtle at first) that this pattern of control and isolation was being established. The first signs may have included hurtful criticism, name-calling, an expectation of perfection and sudden mood swings by the abuser. Over time, the abusive partner may have told the victim that the abuse was her fault, that if she were just smarter, a better cook or a more capable mother that he would not have to do this to her.



Advocates and law enforcement agencies around Tennessee seek solutions to the state's high rate of fatal domestic violence. An October vigil in Franklin honored the memory of Megan Henneberg, a nurse slain by her husband. SANFORD MYERS / FILE / THE TENNESSEAN

she were just smarter, a better cook or a more capable mother that he would not have to do this to her.

A victim may have suffered through years in the cycle of violence, always uncertain of what to expect from her partner. These incidents of violence may have intensified over time, and the combination of isolation and fear

left the victim feeling as if she had no options and that no one would believe what she was experiencing because it was hard for her to believe herself.

It is possible to get stuck on the question, "why didn't she just leave?" But it is not that simple. Leaving is a process, not an event, and someone may leave many times before they actually make a break from an abusive relationship. A victim of abuse may think it is not possible to leave or they might be fearful for what would happen if their partner carried out the threats made in the past.

They may be trying to protect their children or other family members. Resources available to help them, such as the YWCA of Nashville and Middle Tennessee.

While these statistics and much of the focus of domestic violence is about abuse inflicted by men against women, that is not the entire picture. Although the most common dynamic for partner violence is a female victim at the hands of a man, men can be victims of domestic abuse and violence that happens in same-sex relationships, as well.

The YWCA Crisis and Information Line, 615-242-1199, is available 24 hours a day to anyone who is afraid of someone they love. Don't wait to reach out for help for you or someone you know.

Pamela Sessions is vice president of programs at the YWCA of Nashville and Middle Tennessee.

## State must get tougher on repeat abusers

By Kim Helper

Under most circumstances, a top five national ranking for Tennessee would be cause for celebration. However, no applause followed the recent announcement by the Washington, D.C.-based Violence Policy Center that Tennessee is fifth in the nation in the rate of women murdered by men.



Helper

Instead, Tennessee's placement near the top of this list is a sobering reminder that this state must continue to be diligent in its campaign to reduce domestic violence.

According to the statistics cited in the study, 63 females were murdered by males in Tennessee in 2008. Of that number, more than half were domestic partners or former domestic partners of the offenders. These statistics highlight the need in Tennessee for better education about domestic violence, more intensive batterer's-intervention programs combined with stronger laws for

repeat offenders, and support for victims within the community.

The Tennessee General Assembly has already taken steps toward some of these goals. A sentencing judge may now require a domestic violence offender to complete a counseling program addressing violence and control issues as a condition of probation. The failure to complete the program can result in the offender's incarceration for the full term of the sentence.

In addition, the State Board of Probation and Parole also recognized the need for an intensive program and implemented a Batterers Prevention Program for male probationers and parolees with a history of domestic violence.

While the goal of these counseling programs is to prevent the recurrence of domestic violence, the state needs to enact stronger laws targeting repeat offenders who fail to complete the program or return to abusive behavior. Unlike the state's DUI laws, there is no additional penalty for a second or third offense of domestic violence. Requiring repeat offend-

ers to serve mandatory jail time, with the length of incarceration increasing following every conviction, would demonstrate that Tennessee is serious about addressing this problem.

### Gun access is a problem

The Violence Policy Center also determined that guns were used in more than 60 percent of the murders involving intimate partners. Tennessee now bans convicted domestic violence offenders and those barred from contact under an order of protection from possessing handguns. Affidavits of dispossession of these weapons are required following conviction or following the granting of an order of protection. Our court system must be diligent in ensuring these guns are turned over by these offenders so they are not used as murder weapons in the future.

Finally, no discussion about ending domestic violence would be complete without addressing the needs of the women at risk. Advocates rely on statistics that show, on average, a woman will

leave an abusive relationship seven times before she leaves for good. Domestic violence shelters recognize the need for education and support for these women to break the cycle of abuse. However, the nation's economic woes have limited the funding available to these agencies. Similarly, money for community education to help citizens recognize and understand the challenges facing abuse victims is lacking at this time. Perhaps, as the economy recovers, more funding will become available to put these educational and outreach programs in place.

Tennessee has implemented legislation aimed at lowering its ranking on the list prepared by the Violence Policy Center. But there is more to be done. A combination of intensive counseling, harsher penalties for repeat offenders and education are just some of the necessary measures to make Tennessee safer for women.

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