

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## Wanted: Safe Shelters and a Legal Voice for Families

*“I don’t have the words to express my gratitude to you. You really touch my heart. Now I see a future for me and my children. Thank you so much!”*

– Anonymous, United Family Services Domestic Violence Program

### Facing the Challenge



Domestic violence is disproportionately a women’s issue because the vast majority of domestic violence cases—and deaths—are women.

In 2007 alone, 10 persons in Charlotte-Mecklenburg died in domestic homicides. Seven were women killed by a male intimate partner. Three victims were men but only one was a perpetrator (one was killed by a female intimate partner, one was killed by his girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend, and one killed himself after murdering his wife.)

Domestic violence is widespread, based not only on calls to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) but also on the number of women seeking emergency housing as a result of domestic violence. Yet, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has grossly inadequate emergency-housing facilities to provide a safe place for these women. Hundreds of women and their children are being turned away each year from the current shelter because of lack of space. The shelter provides up to 30 days of residency to give a woman time to make plans for a future free from violence.

Domestic violence victims who go to court against their batterer or seek child custody, separations or divorces often don’t have legal representation. That gives them an enormous disadvantage in complicated court proceedings.

### Making the Case The Domestic Violence Reality

From 2002 through 2007, domestic calls to 911 exceeded 30,000 each year. Though the total contains duplicate calls, the figure is alarming.<sup>1</sup> especially considering the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) estimates that 73 percent of domestic violence assaults go unreported.

Often cited by people in the domestic violence field is this NIJ statistic: One in four women in the United States is raped or physically assaulted at some time during her lifetime by a former spouse, cohabitating partner or date. For men, the figure is 7.5 percent.<sup>2</sup> Globally, the figure is even worse—one in three women is beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.<sup>3</sup>

Dating violence among U.S. teens is also common: One in five female high school students reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. Abused girls are significantly more

likely to get involved in other risky behaviors. They are four to six times more likely to get pregnant and eight to nine times more likely to have attempted suicide.

One in three teens reports knowing a friend or peer who has been hit, punched, slapped, choked or physically hurt by his/her partner.<sup>3</sup>

Relationship abuse can occur at any age. A recent study reports that one in four women older than 65 years has been the victim of physical, sexual or psychological violence at the hands of a spouse or other intimate partner.<sup>4</sup> The authors suggested increasing efforts to address partner violence in older women. They also explained that the results

are probably an underestimate: Participants in the study were consistently insured and highly educated. Violence rates tend to be higher among persons without consistent insurance and with less formal education.

More than nine out of 10 women (92 percent) say that reducing domestic violence and sexual assault should be at the top of any formal efforts taken on behalf of women today.<sup>3</sup>

According to CMPD, 6,487 (18 percent) of the 35,169 domestic calls received in 2006 became cases. Of those cases, 661 (10 percent) had a member of the Domestic Violence Unit listed as the primary investigator.

## ACTION

### New Battered Women’s Shelter

The Women’s Summit recommends supporting a multimillion dollar capital campaign planned for 2009 by United Family Services (UFS). This campaign would pay for a larger, more extensive emergency and transitional shelter for battered women.

A nonprofit that has served Charlotte-Mecklenburg since 1909, UFS needs support in educating the public and elected officials on the need for a new shelter and in identifying, contacting and pitching potential major donors.

### Legal Representation Program

The Women’s Summit recommends supporting a UFS request for \$60,000 to establish a legal representation program. The \$60,000 would fund one full-time attorney/staffer to recruit local attorneys as volunteers and to coordinate the program among a handful of groups—the UFS Victim Assistance Domestic Violence Program, the volunteer attorneys, law students from the Charlotte School of Law, and Mecklenburg County domestic violence courts.

The Women’s Summit would coordinate fundraising among law firms and individuals. A committee would be named to oversee the process and perhaps set up individual or group solicitations.

because of domestic violence. The overall figure for the six years was 47 domestic violence homicides. The two highest years were 2005 (11 homicides) and 2007 (10), as of mid-January 2008.<sup>6</sup> (Note: The 2007 figure could change if a case is designated a domestic violence homicide.)

Based on the mid-January figures, from 2002 through 2007 domestic homicides in Mecklenburg represented 10 percent of the 457 domestic homicides across the state. That's an average of 76 per year for the state as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Nationally, 74 percent of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner (spouse, common-law spouse, ex-spouse or boyfriend/girlfriend). Of these, 96 percent are females killed by their intimate partners.<sup>3</sup>

### What Is Intimate Partner Violence?

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a broader term that refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship. IPV is a specific and inclusive definition of intimate relationships involving current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends, including same-sex relationships. These relationships are not included: relatives (parent, child, sibling, grandparent, in-law, cousin), acquaintances (friend, co-worker, neighbor, schoolmate, someone known), or strangers (anyone not previously known by the victim). IPV behavior includes:

- Acts of physical aggression—such as slapping, hitting, kicking and beating.
- Psychological abuse—such as intimidation, constant belittling and humiliating.
- Forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion.
- Various controlling behaviors—such as isolating a person from their family and friends, monitoring their movements, and restricting their access to information or assistance.

When abuse occurs repeatedly in the same relationship, the phenomenon is often referred to as “battering.”<sup>7</sup>

## The Consequences of IPV

Physical assault by intimate partners is serious problem that can have lasting, harmful effects on victims and their family, friends, and communities. Each year approximately 1.3 million women are physically assaulted by an intimate partner in the United States.<sup>8</sup> As estimated in 2003 dollars, the cost of intimate partner violence is \$8.3 billion for medical care, mental health services, and lost productivity (for example, time away from work).<sup>8, 9</sup>

Each year, IPV results in an estimated 1,200 deaths and two million injuries among women and nearly 600,000 injuries among men in the United States. In addition to the risk for death and injury, IPV has been associated with certain adverse health conditions and health-risk behaviors. Women who were abused physically or emotionally by a current or former partner were 70 percent more likely to have asthma,

40 percent more likely to have heart disease and 26 percent more likely to have arthritis compared with women without a history of abuse.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Women with a history of IPV are more likely to display behaviors that present further health risks (for example, substance abuse, alcoholism, and suicide attempts) than women without a history of IPV.<sup>12</sup>

## Domestic Violence and Incarceration Are Linked

Providing adequate emergency housing and legal representation for domestic violence victims also may offset potential crime. The UFS program for incarcerated women estimates that over 80 percent of women in jail have a history of being domestic violence victims.

In September 2007, women represented eight percent of the jail population in Mecklenburg County.



*“So I came to the battered women’s shelter and guess what I found there—peace, love, joy, happiness all rolled into one big family. It was the best thing that could have happened in my life because there I had time for myself. I also got a peace of mind back so I could function and be a mother again. I would just like to thank the battered women’s shelter for giving me aid and assistance when I was at my weakest.”*

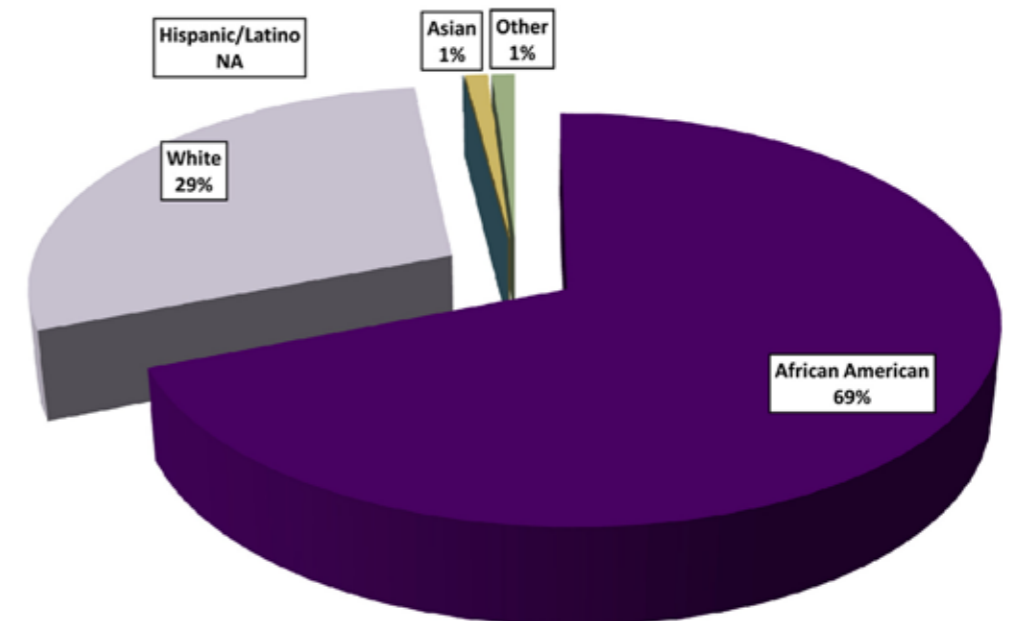
— Linda, United Family Services Domestic Violence Program

Of the 7,750 domestic violence cases in 2005, 76 percent of the victims were female. Of the 7,633 cases in 2006, women represented 80 percent of the victims.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, nearly seven out of 10 homicide deaths resulting from domestic violence in Mecklenburg County are women. That's based on data from 2003 through 2006, when 31 county residents died in domestic homicides, 21 women and 10 men. The 29 suspects identified in those domestic homicide cases were overwhelmingly men; 23 were men and six were women.<sup>5</sup>

From 2002 through 2007 in Mecklenburg County, an average of nearly eight deaths per year occurred

**Racial and Ethnic Breakdown of Domestic Violence Victims  
By Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Cases FY2005**



Source : Domestic Violence in Charlotte Mecklenburg, 2006.  
\*Percentages are rounded up so may not add up precisely to 100% Hispanics are considered an ethnic group, not a race; therefore, Hispanics are classified as “white” by the CMPD. A breakdown of ethnic groups is not available.

Nearly eight of 10 of these women (77 percent) were incarcerated for nonviolent crimes related to drugs, property, traffic and prostitution. Yet, in general, about four out of 10 (41 percent) of female inmates are re-arrested within a year after being released from jail.<sup>13</sup>

## Domestic Violence Affects Racial and Ethnic Population Groups

Certain groups are at greater risk for intimate partner violence. Young females and those below the poverty line are disproportionately victims. Among racial and ethnic groups most at risk are American Indian or Alaska Native, African American, and Hispanic females.<sup>26</sup>

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg domestic violence has disproportionate effects on nonwhite women. Based on three measures in 2005, African Americans represented more than half of domestic violence victims. Hispanics, Asians and “Other” comprised about 10 percent. Whites were approximately a third. These figures are based on data from three sources—CMPD cases, domestic violence programs through the Mecklenburg County Women’s Commission and UFS (see chart).<sup>3</sup>

## Why Is a New Shelter Needed for Domestic Violence Victims?

The current, 29-bed shelter is woefully inadequate. In 2006, approximately 840 women and their children were turned away from the Shelter for Battered Women because it had reached capacity. That compares to approximately 252 being turned away in 2004 and 216 in 2003. The increase from 2003 to 2006 was nearly fourfold.<sup>3</sup>

The shelter staff members refer those turned away to homeless shelters, motels or homes of family and friends. None of these options provides the appropriate security and support services available at the shelter. They act as a bandage, offering temporary relief but doing little to break the cycle of abuse.

UFS opened the shelter in 1979 with 25 beds and has added four since. Today’s 29-bed capacity gives Charlotte-Mecklenburg significantly fewer emergency shelter beds compared with city-county areas of similar size, such as Austin (122 beds), Indianapolis (120), Jacksonville (95), Portland (81) and Louisville (74). Charlotte-Mecklenburg also trails nearby communities of Monroe/Union County (42 beds) and Concord/Cabarrus County (30).<sup>15</sup>

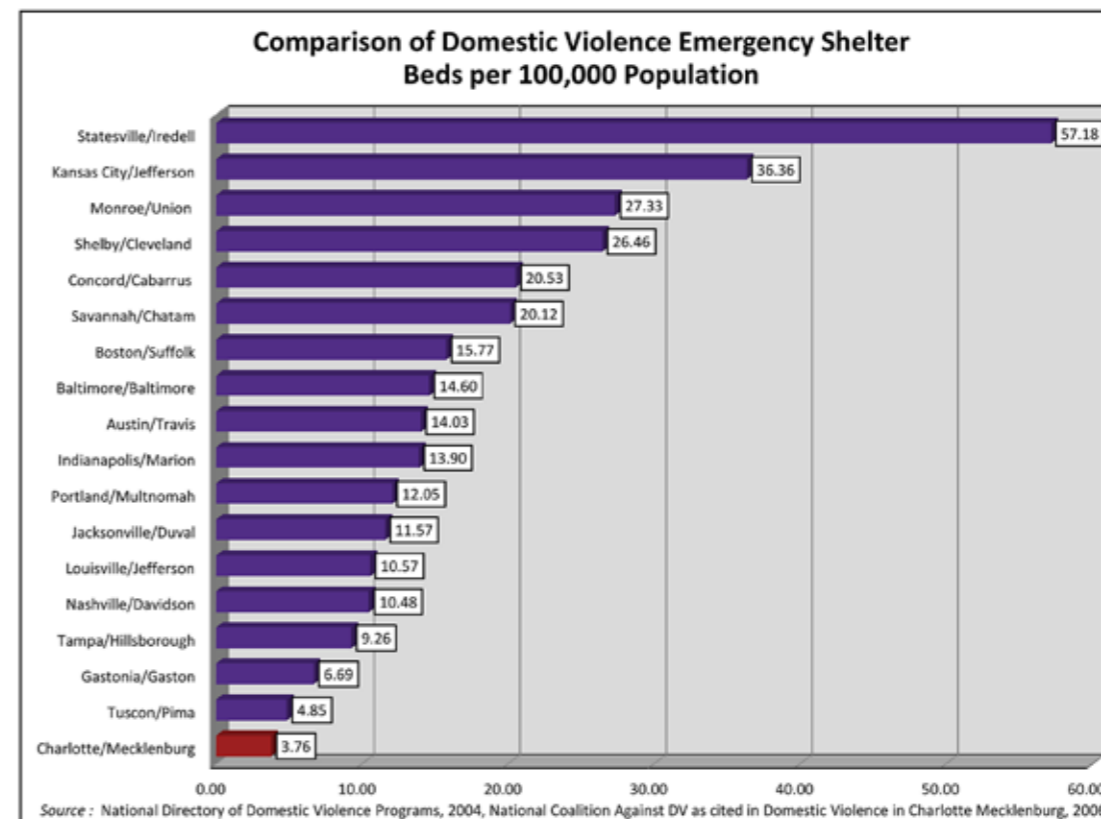
UFS plans a multimillion dollar capital campaign in 2009 to fund a new shelter. It will be a domestic violence transitional living center located on five acres in central Mecklenburg County. It will be easily accessible to public transportation and other service providers.

To be called, “Peace Village, A Domestic Violence Survival Center for Women and Children,” it will be a self-contained campus offering short and long-term transitional housing on site. It will have 80 beds—nearly three times what is available now at 29 beds. Plans are for buildings and cottages to surround a central courtyard, ensuring security and privacy in a healing atmosphere, with plenty of light, open space and planted areas. Peace Village will provide a comprehensive range of services: trauma and sexual assault counseling, health care, education and job training, legal advocacy, licensed child care, consumer-credit counseling, transportation and housing assistance.

A smaller, satellite facility may be built in northern Mecklenburg County, providing an additional 40 beds. If the satellite facility is built, it would give Charlotte-Mecklenburg 120 beds and make it comparable to cities/counties of similar size.

## Why Is a Legal Representation Program Needed?

Through its Victim Assistance program, UFS annually serves 2,000 to 3,000 women who experience domestic violence. Less than one in five (18 percent) has legal representation. A victim who



takes her batterer to court for a restraining order, custody or child-support actions, separation or divorce faces a complex legal system.

If the victim secures representation through Victim Assistance, one of two legal-aid law firms usually is named. The case loads are overwhelming.

Money is a big issue. In 2004, nearly seven out of 10 clients of Victim Assistance were living below the federal poverty level of \$18,850 for a family of four. With what little money they may have, female victims typically experience financial abuse from their batterer and have few or no resources to obtain an attorney. A private attorney in the Charlotte area, meanwhile, costs from \$2,500 to \$5,000 to assist a victim with a divorce or custody case, depending on the severity of the case and the hours spent by the attorney.

If her batterer has an attorney, which is often the case, she is at a serious disadvantage. This unbalanced nature of cases often leads women to return to their batterers, risking their well-being

and that of their children. By not having legal representation, women also may lose custody of their children or otherwise not receive the support they deserve.

UFS envisions that clients of Victim Assistance would be represented by local volunteer lawyers. They would partner with Charlotte School of Law students to provide legal help to victims.

Victim Assistance is also considering a hotline staffed by volunteer attorneys. Domestic violence victims can call in, free of charge, with questions pertaining to custody, separation, child support and related issues. Wake Forest University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have similar programs that have been successful. Those programs could be a model for Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

***“The system was more than I bargained for. Having someone hold my hand was wonderful.”***

— Marlene, United Family Services Domestic Violence Program