

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month – Let’s all work together to stop domestic and sexual violence

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and along with other states, we’re taking the opportunity to bring attention, education, and community engagement to this issue. This year, the atmosphere feels a little more urgent as our collective efforts to end domestic and interpersonal violence are coinciding with greater public attention to these issues. The attention is important, but without action, it isn’t enough.

The Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault’s mission is, “Alaska, freed from domestic violence and sexual assault,” and while mass public attitudes about these long-standing social conditions may be changing, are we truly making progress? The key is transforming attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs that then change into new behaviors. Without behavioral changes, progress is limited to people knowing that domestic violence is wrong, but not working to end the abusive behavior.

Alaska has shone a bright light on interpersonal violence over the past ten years – collecting data; enhancing and expanding services for victims and survivors; and improving access to legal services, violent crime compensation, and safe housing. Programs that hold perpetrators of abuse accountable and engaged in treatment and counseling are improving. We have implemented multi-strategy prevention approaches to reach children, youth, and young adults including programs such as Girls on the Run, Coaching Boys into Men and Green Dot.

In 2016, the University of Alaska Anchorage Justice Center conducted a Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs Survey. Its primary objective was to establish baseline data about how Alaskans view domestic violence and sexual assault. 81.9% of Alaska adults believe domestic violence is a problem in their community, and 94.7% believe they have a responsibility to intervene. The bigger question is how many do intervene—the belief is evident, but the action/behaviors are less apparent.

We have Alaska data that shows a decrease in intimate partner violence between 2010 and 2015. The Alaska Victimization Survey (AVS) was conducted first in 2010 and again in 2015 with over 3,000 interviews with Alaska women aged 18+. Past year intimate partner violence decreased from 9.4% in 2010 to 6.4% in 2015. While these numbers show clear and convincing improvement; is this improvement continuing? The Council’s goal is to conduct this survey every 5 years to document the scope of the problem with reliable and valid data and to examine trends over time that can guide and evaluate planning and policy development. The next survey is scheduled for 2020.

Other important data gleaned from the 2015 AVS data relates to interpersonal violence of women 60+ years of age and incidents of stalking of women. Results showed that 1 in 9 Alaska women aged 60 or older (11.5%) experienced psychological or physical abuse in the past year, 1 in 3 adult women in Alaska have been victims of stalking in their lifetime, and 1 in seventeen experienced stalking in 2015.

These data underscore the need to create positive beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about healthy relationships, while treating everyone with respect and changing stereotypical attitudes about the roles of women and men. Youth across Alaska are standing up and taking on strong leadership roles to bring about positive change and a reversal of the grim data indicated above. Adults are also taking a stand against interpersonal violence, speaking up and leading by example, giving youth a strong foundation to build their adult attitudes and behaviors.

We now need to bring all of this together into comprehensive actions to create a collective impact across Alaska. We know that change happens at the individual, family, community and statewide level; we also know that each community has its own cultural and social fabric that is unique and must be addressed locally by those who live in the community. In a recent training, it was stated that to change community norms and behaviors, the community must come together to decide what is or is not acceptable. Once the community determines they want to live in an environment free from interpersonal violence, such behavior will no longer be acceptable or allowed—change will happen.

We ask every Alaskan in every community to have a dialogue, listen, and act to continue the process of discovery toward an Alaska free of interpersonal violence.

The Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault promotes the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault, and provides safety for Alaskans victimized or impacted by domestic violence and sexual assault through a statewide system of crisis intervention and support, and by demanding perpetrator accountability. Learn more and find local domestic violence resources by visiting <https://dps.alaska.gov/CDVSA/Home>.