



Responding to domestic violence

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Many homes in South Lake Tahoe are not safe places where families can take refuge from the stresses of daily life. In abusive homes, victims fear that not having the house picked up or dinner on the table on time will result in ongoing insults or black eyes, and children learn to stuff their fears and confusion deep down when they hear and watch one parent hurt the other. After the initial shock of the first violent episode, everyone in the abusive home begins to normalize the situation and the neighbors get used to hearing yelling, and bumps in the night. If you suspect that a home near yours is not safe, call the police. With a simple phone call, you could help a family connect with South Lake Tahoe's Domestic Violence Response Team, which can help make our community safer for all those who live here.

South Lake Tahoe Police Department and South Lake Tahoe Women's Center collaborate on a daily basis to respond to the problem of domestic violence in our community. In 2003, the agencies received and continue to receive a grant from the California Office of Emergency Services to establish and operate a Domestic Violence Response Team. The DVRT team consists of one detective to further investigate domestic violence crimes and to hold batterers accountable, and two advocates from the Women's Center to provide options, resources, services and support to victims and their children. According to DVRT Detective Chuck Owens, "Our goals are to help victims realize that they are not at fault and there are resources in our community which can help make them feel safe, and to help perpetrators realize that their behaviors are unacceptable and the consequence is that they will go to jail."

Domestic violence calls are some of the most dangerous calls to which police respond due to the elevated emotional states of everyone involved, including children who often witness violence in the home. Maintaining the safety of all parties in domestic violence situations is critical, but officers are there to do more than just make arrests. Detective Owens knows from experience that "officers have to have good communication skills and an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. Things are not always black and white." He also points out that the ways in which officers handle domestic violence calls has a direct impact on whether victims call for police assistance in the future.

"Our officers strive to provide the best services to the community, and a positive feeling from the police department can provide [victims] with that willingness to come forward and share their fears," Owens said.

Perpetrators of domestic violence are often controlling and manipulative and exert power and dominance through violence. Abusers carefully manipulate their victims and isolate them from those they love. According to Owens, "victims feel that they have to stay in an unfavorable relationship because they feel alone and that no one is willing to listen to them or help them." Jennifer Kline, a Domestic Violence Response Team advocate who spends her days working with victims of domestic violence and their children, asserts that "having this system in place to respond to families experiencing domestic violence is essential to our collaborative effort to stop violence and abuse in our community."

Most domestic violence relationships become increasingly volatile over time, so victims are at increased risk the longer they remain in the relationships. This means that the situation will become more dangerous for everyone involved, including police officers responding to the scene, the longer a victim or a neighbor waits to call the police. Our community's three-member Domestic Violence Response Team cannot provide interventions and resources for families until someone calls 911. Don't be afraid to make the call - you may save someone's life.

For more information or for free domestic violence prevention education, call South Lake Tahoe Women's Center at (530) 544-2118.

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