

**Providence House**  
**Domestic Violence Services of Catholic Charities**  
**EMPOWER Partnership with Georgian Court University**

Presented to the Members of the New Jersey Senate Higher Education Committee

Monday, December 12, 2016

By way of introduction, I am Mary Pettrow, the associate director for Providence House Domestic Violence Services (PHDVS) of Catholic Charities, and I appreciate your time this morning to expand upon the partnership between PHDVS and Georgian Court University (GCU) to address sexual assault, domestic abuse, dating violence, and stalking on GCU's campus through the Office of Violence Against Women (OVW) grant.

Approximately four years ago, local law enforcement called the Providence House 24-hour domestic violence crisis hotline because they had a mother of two, "Susan," who had been held hostage in her home by her abusive husband and needed placement in the emergency Safe House. During her two days of being bound to the bed, Susan was repeatedly verbally, physically, and sexually abused by her husband. Susan's two teenage daughters living in the home were told if they did anything to attempt to intervene that their mother would be killed, so they continued to go to school and told no one. On day two, Susan was released from her restraints to take a shower at which time she jumped from her second-story bathroom window. She broke both ankles when she hit the ground but crawled naked and terrified to her neighbor's house for help. *Susan was a student at Georgian Court University.* As she relayed the details of her abuse to Providence House counselors, Susan reported that the violence has continued to escalate as she got closer to graduation and that her abusive husband had stalked her repeatedly while she was on campus. Not only had he stalked her, he had taken her parking permit and frequented the campus to follow students and professors that he believed were either attracted to Susan or might attempt to help her leave him.

Susan's primary request after receiving safe shelter was to have her teenage daughters watch her graduate. Although Susan's husband was on the run and considered a very serious threat, Georgian Court University Security, Lakewood Police, and Providence House coordinated efforts to ensure Susan walked with her graduating class and that her daughters watched her do so. Susan is now a teacher, and one of her daughters is now herself a college student.

While it is certainly important to focus on stranger-perpetrated sexual violence and the impact that drugs and alcohol can have on escalating such incidences on a campus, I am encouraged to be partnering with GCU and Lakewood Police to additionally address intimate partner violence as well.

*Domestic violence* is the systematic use of coercion and control demonstrated through a series of abusive behaviors by one intimate partner against another. Across generations, it is a pattern of learned behavior that is modeled by parents and ingrained in children as

they grow up, long before they head to college. While physical assault is often the first mode of abuse that comes to mind when hearing the words *domestic violence*, and sexual assault is acknowledged to be a problem on college campuses, girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence, almost triple the national average.<sup>1</sup> This pervasive problem of intimate partner violence on campus includes sexual violence, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, isolation tactics, stalking (including cyber-stalking), as well as psychological violence and manipulation of the victim. Research has shown that almost half—a shocking 43 percent of college women—report experiencing violent and abusive dating behaviors.<sup>2</sup> The overall impact of domestic violence has longstanding detrimental effects on the individual, the family, the community, and society at large. With funds from this grant, we will embed Providence House staff on the campus to provide interventions into family violence.

In the last two decades, along with an increase in research, the public understanding of domestic violence has grown after many years of the topic being considered a “family matter” that should stay private behind closed doors. Even with an increase in awareness, the scope and breadth of its occurrence is often still surprising to learn. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, intimate partner violence alone (the highest occurring type of domestic violence committed by an intimate partner as opposed to a non-intimate family member) affects more than 12 million people each year in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards reports that 28 percent of adults receiving crime victim compensation benefits in 2001 were domestic violence victims.<sup>4</sup> As the media becomes more educated on the topic and learns to start saying out loud words such as “strangulation” and stop using words such as “lover’s quarrel” in their coverage of domestic violence homicides, the fact that on average more than three women a day are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in the United States can begin to come into the light.<sup>5</sup>

Providence House Domestic Violence Services of Catholic Charities was created to respond to this pervasive problem of domestic abuse in our own community in Ocean County. According to the most recent New Jersey Uniform Crime Report, there were

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2006, December). *Intimate partner violence in the United States, 1993–2004*.

<sup>2</sup> Fifth & Pacific Companies, Inc. (Formerly: Liz Claiborne, Inc.), Conducted by Knowledge Networks. (December 2010). *College dating violence and abuse poll*. Available at <https://www.breakthecycle.org/surveys>.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention. (2010). *National intimate partner and sexual violence survey 2010 summary report* (pp. v–vii). Available at [http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs\\_report2010-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards. (2002). Compensation at record highs. *Victim Compensation Quarterly*, (3), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Catalano, S. (2007). *Intimate partner violence in the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipvus.pdf>

3,963 incidences of domestic abuse *reported* in 2014 in Ocean County, New Jersey, alone.<sup>6</sup> These numbers do not tell the whole story however, since 75 percent of all physical assaults against women by intimates go *unreported* to police.<sup>7</sup>

Domestic violence victims are now not only recognized as victims of crime under the law, but as victims of human rights violations. With this recognition, awareness grows on many fronts, including the community impact of domestic violence, the need for services for victims and their children, and the necessity for prevention work: prevention not only to interrupt the perpetration of abuse by an individual, but preventing the continuation of the intergenerational cycle of violence. Breaking this cycle is a key component of preventing abuse on campus by increasing awareness and changing the culture of what is considered acceptable behavior between intimate partners.

The horrendous individual traumatic impact that domestic abuse causes has longstanding effects. Many people are familiar with the fact that chronic exposure to trauma causes post-traumatic stress disorder in veterans. Due to being in a traumatic environment at a state of heightened alert, changes actually occur on a neurobiological level. The same is true for individuals suffering from other types of trauma, including victims of domestic violence. There is neuroscientific evidence that reveals that the effects of trauma change the way the brain responds to situations and often changes the brain itself.<sup>8</sup>

Trauma therefore changes the way an individual will respond not just in the present when the abuse is active, but in the future, even if she or he is no longer in an abusive situation. Just like veterans, the effects of trauma puts victims of domestic abuse at higher risk for mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD, as well as at higher risk for physical health issues such as heart disease and chronic pain. Compared to the general population, victims of intimate partner violence are 15 percent more likely to self-medicate with drugs and/or alcohol, and between 22 and 57 percent of all homeless women report that domestic violence was the immediate cause of their homelessness.<sup>9</sup>

The trauma and all of its effects do not occur in a vacuum. Witnessing domestic violence, in and of itself, is a trauma for the children who are raised in abusive homes. A child is contending with the potential of an abusive parent coupled with a traumatized parent and the additional fact that there is a high correlation between domestic violence and child abuse. The reality is that the probability that a man will be violent toward his partner

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<sup>6</sup> New Jersey State Police Uniform Crime Reporting Unit. (2014). *Domestic violence in New Jersey for the year ending December 31, 2014*. Available at

[http://www.njsp.org/ucr/pdf/domesticviolence/2014\\_domestic\\_violence.pdf](http://www.njsp.org/ucr/pdf/domesticviolence/2014_domestic_violence.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (2000). *Full report of the prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the national violence against women survey* (BJS Rep. No. NCJ 183781).

Available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Bremner, J. D. (2006). Traumatic stress: Effects on the brain. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 8(4), 445–461. PMID: [17290802](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17290802/)

<sup>9</sup> International Center for Research on Women. (2007). *Estimating the costs and impacts of intimate partner violence in developing countries: A methodological resource guide*, p. 12. Available at

<http://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Estimating-the-Costs-and-Impacts-of-Intimate-Partner-Violence-in-Developing-Countries-A-Methodological-Resource-Guide.pdf>

depends on if he grew up witnessing violence at home. The probability that a woman will remain with a violent partner depends on whether she grew up in a violent home. Research shows that children who grew up in violent homes tend to partner with other individuals that grew up in violent homes when they are adults and the cycle of violence continues.<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, there has been an explosion of research on both the concept of neuroplasticity and a trauma-informed approach to services. *Neuroplasticity* is commonly referred to as “the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. Neuroplasticity allows the neurons (nerve cells) in the brain to compensate for injury and disease and to adjust their activities in response to new situations or to changes in their environment.”<sup>11</sup> *Trauma-informed care* is “an approach to engaging people with histories of trauma that recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in their lives.”<sup>12</sup> These two concepts together manifest in better outcomes for victims of domestic violence.

Providence House Domestic Violence Services works from a trauma-informed approach that accounts for the individual trauma histories of victims, understands the way trauma affects the brain, and embraces a trauma-informed practice to help victims feel supported, understood, and empowered on their road to an abuse-free life. This is the framework we will be bringing to our partnership with Georgian Court University.

Susan is not the only GCU student that has sought out Providence House for help. Two months ago we received a call from “Michael,” who was experiencing dating violence within his same-sex relationship. The threats to “out” him to friends and family, to expose him on social media, and to terrorize and isolate him were very powerful and immobilized him. And “Jeanette,” who called just days ago because she is afraid to go home on winter break. Coming to a college campus was the first experience with tranquility and peace she has known, and she needed help making a safety plan, even if it meant coming into the Safe House for the next 30 days. Together, we can work to keep these students safe and break the cycle of violence for the next generation of students. Living in peace and free from abuse is a basic human right.

Thank you again for this opportunity to address your committee and to serve as the voice of those who have no voice and for those whose voices have been silenced forever.

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<sup>10</sup> Thornberry, T. P. (1994, December). *Violent families and youth violence* (Fact Sheet #21). Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>11</sup> Medicinenet. (n.d.) *Neuroplasticity*. Available at <http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=40362>

<sup>12</sup> National Center for Trauma Informed Care. (2013). Available at <https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/about>