



The Friendship Center

NEWSLETTER | SPRING 2020



Sexual Assaults: Problem, Prevention, Partnerships, & Response

Photo by Alvin Mahmudov on Unsplash

Every year, April is recognized as Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Though the current pandemic is front and center in all of our minds, we would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to recognize that sexual violence is a pervasive and real problem in our community.

A Problem of Epidemic Proportions

Talking about sexual violence* isn't

easy, and yet sexual violence is a reality impacting a staggering number of Americans.

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, more than 1 in 3 women and nearly 1 in 4 men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes. Nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives.

And 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old. Our community is not immune to these statistics. In 2019, TFC saw an 85% increase over the previous year in the number of victims who came to us because they had been sexually assaulted.**

This is a problem of epidemic proportions. So why is it so hard to talk about? It can be culturally very uncomfortable talking about these issues. Also, our language fails us, and we just don't

* Sexual violence is a term which encompasses not only physical violence, such as sexual assault, but also acts of sexual intimidation that don't involve physical contact.

**Sexual assault is any type of sexual activity or contact that happens without consent.

The Friendship Center is the only DVSA shelter in Lewis and Clark, Jefferson, and Broadwater Counties. Our mission is to be a safe haven for those affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking and to empower our community to flourish in relationships free from violence.



Open to the Public: Monday-Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. | Friday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location: 1430 Sanders, Helena MT 59601

Call: 406-442-6800 (Anytime) | Email: office.m@thefriendshipcenter.org

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Sexual Assaults cont'd

have the practice. But it's time to adapt and learn how.

As long as this issue stays in the shadows, as long as we fail to find the language to speak about what's happening, these numbers are not going to abate.

An Ounce of Prevention

That's why The Friendship Center has been especially focused on prevention through outreach and education. Due to the pandemic, our outreach efforts are temporarily on hold, but in normal times we accept every invitation we receive to visit classrooms and to talk to students about healthy relationships, personal boundaries, and consent.

Last year, we presented to more than 1,300 high school and college students in Lewis and Clark and Broadwater counties. Most of those presentations were given in small classroom settings, where we could engage students in conversation and help answer some of the pressing questions weighing on their minds. We find that students are anxious to have these conversations because they are already grappling in their own lives with questions about healthy relationships, boundaries, and consent. We hope that by directly addressing these questions and facilitating honest dialogue, we are modeling that it is not only okay to talk about this stuff, but essential to living in healthy, happy relationships.

Forging Community Partnerships

We also are committed to growing our relationships with other organizations that are working to address sexual assault in our communities. We are particularly excited that we have been able to build our partnership with St. Peter's Health, meeting with their leadership and nurses to better coordinate responses to victims of sexual assault.

The Friendship Center runs a 24/7 crisis hotline and our advocates stand

“**...sexual violence is not sexy. It is not even about sex. It is about power, about one human being making another feel small and insignificant and humiliated and less-than, and using the tools that we associate with intimacy to do it. And our language is not set up to handle that kind of ambiguity.”**

The Complicated, Inadequate Language of Sexual Violence by Constance Grady, Vox.com, 11.30.2017

ready to respond to hospital calls and to meet with victims of sexual assault any time, day or night. This support allows St. Peter's ER nurses and doctors to focus on the medical needs of the patient, while our

advocates provide emotional support and help coordinate transportation, emergency shelter, and access to longer term resources such as counseling, legal aid, and victim compensation.

Responding to Sexual Assaults

Typically, hospital responses are initiated with a call from the emergency room saying they need an advocate. It might be in the middle of the day, it might be (and often is) in the middle of the night. Upon receiving the call, when we are not practicing social distancing, the on-call advocate hurries to the hospital where hopefully they will have the opportunity to meet with the client for a few minutes to discuss their rights, confidentiality, and to answer any questions about the sexual assault examination and evidence collection kit.

During the pandemic, an advocate is responding to hospital calls via a dedicated phone The Friendship Center has provided to the ER for this purpose.

The examination is generally conducted by a sexual assault nurse examiner; it requires the person to give a narrative of their assault in as much detail as they can remember. The nurse then examines the person's body from head to toe, taking photos, collecting specimens, and documenting everything. It is excruciatingly invasive, particularly given the trauma the person has just experienced.

With their permission, advocates often stay with the victim for their entire stay at the hospital: sexual assault exams typically take around 4-6 hours, although sometimes advocates have been there up to nine hours. The process might be longer if law enforcement is involved and the victim still wishes to provide their statement.

Throughout the exam we talk with the patient and do what we can to provide comfort and support. For some that means being a supportive silent presence, for others it might be providing information or distracting them by discussing family or pets or favorite hobbies between each step of the kit.

The nurses conducting the exams often say how helpful it is for us to be there, tending to the clients' emotional needs, so that they can focus on their job collecting evidence.

There are a lot of things that the patient might be dealing with, some of which wouldn't be obvious to someone who has never experienced this before. For example, law enforcement may take the victim's clothes, bedding and mattress for forensic evidence. The Friendship Center will work to provide replacements for those lost items. Once

the exam is over, the advocate also helps the patient figure out next steps. First and foremost, this may be getting the patient a hot meal and transportation. We also discuss safety planning with them. Sometimes the patient does not feel safe going home, and advocates work with them to get a hotel room or to stay at the shelter.

Follow-up services in the days and weeks to come include emotional support, crisis counseling, help with orders of protection, and referrals to other community resources. If the client chooses to report the assault, we will likely work with them for months or years as they do follow-up interviews with law enforcement, prosecutors, and the offender's defense attorneys. We will go to the trial with them, if it makes it that far, and help them write a victim impact statement for the sentencing hearing if the perpetrator is convicted. We will help them arrange to receive notifications of future probation or parole hearings if jail or prison time is sentenced and help them participate in those hearings if they wish.

Although the services and responses can vary greatly depending on the circumstances and wishes of the client, it is one of the great and humbling privileges of the work we do to walk along someone in their journey. 🌍

Become An Advocate

One of our most vital services is a 24/7 crisis line. If you have always thought about doing more to end domestic and sexual violence in our community, reach out to 442-6800 or visit www.thefriendship-center.org. We host two comprehensive volunteer trainings each year.

Crisis Line Volunteer Spotlight: Connie Cole

I became a Friendship Center volunteer because I wanted to continue to give back to my community. Most of my past volunteer activities have been focused on land conservation and stewardship. These organizations were closely aligned to my recreational activities at the

time. My husband and I enjoyed the bounty of Montana's outdoor activities, and we took advantage of every recreational opportunity Montana had to offer.

As we got older, so did our bodies, and the time came when these wonderful outdoor activities were no longer available to me. I began to look around for another place where I could be of service. I saw an ad in the paper asking for volunteers at The Friendship Center, and I applied. Fortunately for me, I was permitted to become a volunteer and took the advocacy training that was offered soon after.

Advocacy training shifted fundamental beliefs I had about do-

mestic violence and sexual abuse, correcting preconceived notions about why abuse happens and who perpetrates it. The training provided a personal journey for me as well as we examined topics such as family violence, suicide and trauma. At the completion of the advocacy training I also decided to be a

crisis line volunteer, answering the 24-hour crisis line for one weekend a month.

As a result of the time I've spent at The Friendship Center, my heart has opened. I have seen the incredible courage and strength it takes to break away from an abusive relationship. I have met young women, often with children, who have decided that there is a better life than the one they're living and who have taken the steps to change. And I have met the wonderful community of caring, skilled women and men who devote their professional lives to support this effort to change.

It's been a humbling experience, and I'm so very grateful to have been able to experience it. 🌍



Connie Cole

“As a result of the time I've spent at The Friendship Center, my heart has opened.”

Letter from Our Executive Director

Dear friends,
What a difference a few weeks can make. The landscape of our reality has changed for all of us. The impact of COVID-19 on our lives and on our country is almost incomprehensible. A few weeks ago, this newsletter was pretty much done; we were working on some final edits and getting ready to send it off to the printer. My letter was focused on sexual assault and the need to increase education and awareness in our communities.

Just a few days before the pandemic hit New York, I had spent the day in Townsend, talking with Broadwater High School classes about healthy relationships and consent. It was a really good day. The kids were engaged and had great comments and questions. My focus at work was on increasing our ability to provide more outreach to our community, including working to fund a full-time outreach coordinator and preparing for a series of public events for sexual assault awareness month.

Then, quite swiftly, the focus of my work shifted drastically.

Obviously, all of that has been put on the back burner for now. Our focus now squarely lies on how to safely provide our core services during a time of crisis, anticipating that the need for our services will increase. Our mission at this time is to support and protect the women and children who live in our shelter and to continue to provide crisis response services to those impacted by

domestic and sexual violence in our community.

First, and most importantly, I want to assure our community that our services are still available. If you, or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, you



Jenny Eck

are not alone. Our 24/7 crisis line remains open, and an advocate is available to assist you. Thankfully, under the Governor's Shelter-in-Place order, domestic violence shelters are deemed an "essential service," and we are able to continue operating. I am privileged to work with

dedicated staff and volunteer advocates who are undaunted in their commitment to continuing to serve victims, even amid the pandemic.

Women and children continue to reside in our shelter and many others are accessing our crisis services. The Friendship Center is doing everything we can to meet the needs of our community's most vulnerable while also working to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. We have implemented internal protocols and safety measures to try to limit exposure for our staff, our residents, and the public. This means that for now, we are closed to the general public and are generally not accepting material donations, other than those items specified on the back page of this newsletter.

At the Friendship Center, we are looking at the ways in which this situa-

tion is increasing risk factors for victims of abuse. We know that significantly increased stress at home and severe isolation are two extreme risk factors for domestic violence. Add to that the difficulty of finding shelter or support from friends and family during this pandemic, and you get a perfect storm for increased need for our services.

Even healthy relationships are strained by this new reality in which we find ourselves: being constrained in close quarters, dealing with the stress of reduced income, and trying to keep up with work and other responsibilities while also handling kids who are home and bored all day. Add to that the difficulty in accessing mental health services, isolation from friends and family or other support networks, and the intense daily fear of contracting a deadly virus, and we are all well-aware of the pressure cooker that this epidemic can create. Unfortunately, these circumstances create the perfect storm for exacerbating "intimate terrorism" ... or domestic violence. For those who are already in a controlling, abusive relationship, these circumstances have heightened the risk of violence. Isolation is commonly used by abusers as a means of control.

As we watch this epidemic move through other countries and cities, we are seeing a disturbing spike in incidents of domestic violence. A recent New York Times report cited an 18% increase in domestic violence calls in Spain, and a 30% increase in France, since those countries went into lockdown.

Already we are starting to hear from victims who identify this new re-

ality as contributing to the abuse, both physical and emotional, that they are experiencing. As social distancing continues, and the weeks of stress wear on, we are anticipating an increased need for our services.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline has provided some examples of ways an intimate partner might even use COVID-19 to their advantage:

- Withhold necessary items, such as hand sanitizer or disinfectants.
- Share misinformation about the pandemic to control or frighten survivors, or to prevent them from seeking appropriate medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Withhold insurance cards or threaten to cancel insurance.
- Feel more justified in escalating their isolation tactics, like keeping a partner away from their kids, family members, and friends

Financial manipulation, a common tactic used by abusers, can be made all the worse as people are laid off from their jobs. They also may be prevented from going to work on the grounds they could expose the family to the virus.

For victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking, feelings of vulnerability and trauma can resurface in the wake of a new crisis. Retraumatization is real, and crisis line advocates also are available for those who need that kind of emotional support.

For all of these reasons, The Friendship Center is committed to continuing to serve this community. We are available to listen, to help problem solve, and to safety plan.

As is always the case in the nonprofit world, we are positioning ourselves to be as nimble as possible. Filling gaps when we find them. Adapting to new technology while being cognizant of our grave responsibility for confidentiality. Problem solving ways to put phones in the hands of people who need a means to reach out without

being tracked by their abuser. Each day brings new challenges that we could not have even considered a month ago, and each day we make the necessary adjustments to ensure our services are available.

At The Friendship Center, I bare witness every day to the extraordinary courage and resiliency of the human spirit as well as the incredible generosity and care of this community. Times like these remind us of what matters most and show us how much we need one another. Although the coming

days and weeks won't be easy, I am buoyed by hope stemming from the goodwill of this community and the dedicated people who are committed to serving our community's most vulnerable through it all.

Thank you for your steadfast support and commitment to the people we serve at The Friendship Center. It is because of you that we are ready to respond and continue to be a resource at this critical time.



We are so grateful for your support. Your donations during the pandemic are invaluable.

- 🌀 Allow us to be as nimble as possible, including sheltering more people in hotel rooms where social distancing is possible.
- 🌀 Minimize exposure of shelter residents by helping us purchase food and supplies for them, consolidating grocery store visits.
- 🌀 Provide safe phones to our clients who are living in isolation so they can reach out for help.
- 🌀 Give kids living in shelter access to additional technology to complete their school work.
- 🌀 Ensure access to new technology necessary to keep our services available while staff and shelter residents safe.



TFC BY THE NUMBERS

In 2019

7,015
services provided to

670
known individuals

132
orders of protection for **95** people

166
in-person hospital and law enforcement responses for **109** people

447
in-person crisis counseling sessions to **269** people

4,386
nights of safe shelter to **90** adults

6,438
nights of safe shelter to **44** children

Self-Care During Tragedy

Feeling anxious? Retraumatized? The pandemic can be stressful for everyone. If you have previously experienced something traumatic, like domestic or sexual violence, this may be an even more stressful time for you.

If you find yourself dealing with difficult emotions, you are not alone. Retraumatization can occur when any situation, interaction, or environmental factor replicates events or dynamics of prior trauma and triggers feelings and reactions associated with that experience. For example, necessary government mandates may bring up feelings of powerlessness and isolation that can be difficult for a survivor to let go of. It may make you question your safety and security.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) has provided some suggestions for a specific type of self-care called “grounding” that can be helpful in working through those feelings and see you through those especially challenging moments. Grounding can help bring you into the moment and break a recurring cycle of anxious thoughts and reset your mind. (See grounding techniques to the right.)

Remember, an advocate at The Friendship Center is only a phone call away. If you need support call 442-6800. You are not alone. 🍷

Save The Date

HOPE

BENEFIT LUNCHEON

October 7, 2020

This annual event brings our community together to learn firsthand from survivors. Learn about the services we provide to the community and how you can help.

Grounding Techniques

The 5-4-3-2-1 Exercise

Describe 5 things you currently see.

Describe 4 things you feel right now. For

example, “my sweater on my arms,” or “the pencil in my hand.”

Describe 3 things you can hear.

Describe 2 things you can smell right now or smells you like in general.

Describe 1 good thing about yourself.

Call a friend

Call a friend and ask them about their day, focus on what they have to say and allow yourself to be carried away by the conversation. Also, don't be afraid to tell them how you're feeling as well!

Take a shower or bath

Let the experience of the warmth wash over you and focus on the sensation. Light candles or play music as well and focus on the various sounds and scents.

Move around

Take off your shoes and socks and rub your feet on the floor, do some gentle stretches, go for a jog or a walk – anything you can do that will allow you to focus on the sensations within your body. Describe them to yourself and try to stay in the moment.

Guided meditation or yoga

For some people listening to a meditation or practicing yoga can be mentally or physically engaging enough that you're able to be completely in the here-and-now. While these types of activities aren't for everyone, for many they reduce stress and anxiety.

Distract yourself with a project

Whether you paint, draw, sew, or even just like to color, engaging in an activity you enjoy and is soothing can help bring you into the present and relieve some of the pain of trauma. There are several sites online where you can find coloring pages to print at no charge.

Seek support

Sometimes we need to reach out for additional support – and that's okay! It's important to remember that there are other people going through similar struggles, and by addressing our experiences of trauma we can grow even more resilient. Call an advocate at The Friendship Center at 442-6800. We are here for you 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

More Access to Legal Representation for The Friendship Center's clients

Orders of protection, divorce, parenting plans and child custody agreements, as well as housing issues, consumer debt problems, and more. Navigating the legal system can be a barrier to escaping abusive situations and living independently for many victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking.

Survivors in the tri-county area now have access to legal representation through a grant The Friendship Center received this fall from the Office of Violence Against Women Legal Assistance for Victims Program. This three-year grant provides funding for a full-time attorney through a contract with Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA).

With the typical Montana attorney charging an hourly rate of \$125 or more and requiring a retainer, many survivors are unable to afford an attorney even if they can find one to take their case.

Poverty rates alone do not determine whether a survivor will have trouble paying for a private attorney. Because domestic violence often includes financial manipulation (an abuser may block access to any shared bank accounts, for instance, or prevent a survivor from seeking outside employment), many survivors struggle to afford private attorneys even if their total household income places them outside of the federal poverty level.

“Legal representation is often essential to helping survivors leave abusive situations and start new lives for themselves and their children,” said Executive Director of The Friendship

Center Jenny Eck. “We are thrilled to be able to partner with MLSA to offer enhanced legal support to victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and stalking through this grant.”

Funding also enables The

Friendship Center to expand our advocates' ability to help clients with orders of protection and provide court preparation and accompaniment, in addition to safety planning and emotional support. 🌍

Meet Our New Attorney: Akilah Lane

Hello! I am excited to be part of the new collaboration between Montana Legal Services Association and The Friendship Center. Through my position, these two great non-profit organizations will be able to work together to better serve the needs of clients escaping situations of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. I hope that my position enables these two organizations to do greater impact work and reach more clients.

I pursued a degree in law because I am passionate about social justice and dedicated to serving members of vulnerable groups to ensure that all people – regardless of means, race, gender identity, etc. – have

meaningful access to justice. While working with The Friendship Center, I intend to support as many survivors of domestic and sexual violence as possible in exercising their rights and having their voices heard in court. My passion for this work only grows with every client who I meet. I also am currently inspired by every passionate advocate, dedicated law enforcement officer, and other members in the community who are tirelessly working to break cycles of abuse.

When I am not working, I enjoy spending time with my children and the phenomenal community of friends we have found in Helena. I love wandering around downtown Helena any chance that I get and am grateful for all the supportive, charming, local community businesses like Montana Book Co., The Lotus, 1+1=1 Gallery, and Lasso the Moon. I am a devoted runner who has found endless joy and appreciation in having access to the great running trails in Helena. 🌍



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The Friendship Center's newsletter is a membership benefit for those who support our mission. If you value the work we do and would like to continue to receive our newsletter, please donate today.



Donate **TODAY** to support ending domestic and sexual violence in our community:

Use the **ENVELOPE** enclosed in this newsletter

Visit thefriendshipcenter.org and click on **DONATE NOW** in the upper right corner

Make a **RECURRING GIFT** from your credit card or bank account.

Make a **PLANNED GIFT** to take advantage of the Montana Endowment Tax Credit

Give through **SECGC to #3707** if you're a Montana state employee

The Friendship Center

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How You Can Help During COVID-19 Response

- Financial donations are essential to our ability to meet the needs of those impacted domestic and sexual violence in our community, especially during this very stressful time. Go to www.thefriendshipcenter.org/donate
- Gift cards to Walmart for Straight Talk Phones and Minutes. Especially now with social distancing measures in play, these phones can literally be lifelines for our clients; a way for them to access services without being tracked by their abusers. Each Straight Talk Kit and Minutes costs approximately \$100.
- Gift cards to Costco and Safeway for groceries. In an attempt to limit our shelter residents' potential contact with the virus, we will provide them as much food as possible, consolidating trips to the grocery store. If you find yourself at one of these businesses, please consider picking up a gift card.
- Order food and needed supplies directly via our Amazon Wishlist to limit your exposure as well as ours. The Friendship Center's Amazon wish list is at: <https://tinyurl.com/tfchelena>.
- If you have cleaning items such as bleach spray, antibacterial wipes, or hand soap as well as tissues, non-latex disposable gloves, and masks, we would appreciate it if you could donate some of these items to us. We are actively cleaning shelter multiple times each day and are preparing for all contingencies.

THANK YOU

for your continued support of victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in our community!