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Advocates Call for More Attention to Murders of Wives, Girlfriends

By Sarah Kessinger, Harris News Service

Kansas women killed by an intimate partner:

2003 – 15

2004 – 25

2005 – 21

Source: Kansas Bureau of Investigation

TOPEKA – Dozens of Kansas women have been shot to death, beaten and tortured by spouses and boyfriends in recent years yet they're not afforded the same attention the Legislature last year gave to abused dogs, former Kansas Attorney General Bob Stephan told reporters at a Wednesday news conference.

Stephan said people were outraged by press reports on incidents involving tortured dogs and lawmakers responded this year by passing tougher penalties on perpetrators.

Yet every year several women are killed or maimed by a partner and, although it is reported in the media, people in general don't act to prevent future abuse, he said.

"Unless you get the public excited, nothing happens," said Stephan, an attorney in private practice and chairman of the state's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board.

He and others involved in fighting abuse on the home front offered a list of recommendations on what needs to change. Suggestions included more access for women to emergency safety services; new privacy protections for victims; and more prosecutions in domestic violence cases.

Also, they released a new report, "Beyond Statistics: Lethal Domestic and Sexual Violence Against Women in Kansas," detailing the deaths of some 21 women in the past two years.

Each story is disturbing: A 30-year-old Reno County woman shot and left to die as her boyfriend drank a beer nearby; a 21-year-old woman in Ellis County who suffocated as her boyfriend stuffed dirt and debris down her throat; numerous cases of murder-suicide by possessive spouses, including cases where mothers were killed in front of their children.

Sandra Barnett, executive director of the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence that issued the report, said it is the first compilation of lethal and near-lethal attacks on women to be collected in a single document.

The report covers August of 2004 through this past August. Barnett hopes to continue compiling more cases from recent years.

“Our goal today – to know victims’ names, to remember their stories and to honor their lives,” Barnett said.

On hand for the report’s release was National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence executive director Deborah Tucker.

The nation has made great progress in the past 30 years in dealing with abusive relationships, she said, yet violence continues.

“How can we take what we’ve learned and use it to help victims?” Tucker asked.

Barnett said the list of Kansas tragedies backs up national studies showing women are at much greater risk for violence in the home than men.

“The reality is overwhelmingly reinforced by this report,” Barnett said.

Charlotte Linsner, program director of the Northwest Kansas Domestic and Sexual Violence Services in Hays, said later by phone that prevention programs sorely need aid.

The report, she said, “will definitely help us to take a harder look at abuse of women. They are definitely dying at a staggering rate.”

Linsner wants to see abusers charged with felonies, rather than the current misdemeanor, for their first time in court on a domestic violence charge.

“They’ve assaulted someone in some form,” she said “Those assaults always get more lethal with each incident.”

She’d also like to see more funding for programs. Her small staff works to cover 18 counties.

Despite cases of domestic brutality statewide, only 40 percent of Kansas counties have timely crisis services for families and children.

Stephan said his panel has a \$25,000 grant from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment to increase public awareness of the problem and the need for better funding and new solutions.

“It’s certainly a first step,” he said.