

NORTHFIELD NEWS (MN)

July 24, 2004

Domestic Violence Training for Law Enforcement Officers

By Erick Sommers, Staff Writer

[NORTHFIELD] — More than 60 police officers, sheriff's deputies, probation officers and advocates attended a two-day training at the Northfield Community Resource Center Wednesday and Thursday.

The training, under the auspices of the National Sheriff's Association and paid for through a U.S. Department of Justice grant, focused on domestic violence.

"It serves a really important purpose," Northfield police chief Gary Smith said. "With all of the focus on post-9/11, homeland-security things, I get the sense that sometimes we lose track of some of these other social issues because we're so focused on terrorism. These are the original domestic terrorists — people who batter their spouses and children."

Vickie Smith, director of the TAPS program (part of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence), presented the victims' advocacy portions of the training.

"Essentially, our purpose is to provide a fundamental understanding of the issues facing rural law enforcement when they respond to domestic violence calls," she said. "We also delve into the dynamics of violent situations ... Why is this happening? How can we understand what's going on with these individuals?"

Vickie Smith said the primary concept is that individuals willing to use violence — whether physical, emotional, sexual, financial or psychological — have a single, common purpose.

"They want to maintain power in their relationships, they want to remain in charge and are willing to use all these different tactics to stay in control," she said.

She added that in almost every case, by the time police are called to respond, the abuse has been long-term.

"It's almost never just that night," she said. "By the time police are called, the abuse is very probably escalating and becoming more dangerous."

While attending a conference in Philadelphia, Penn. last summer, Smith met one of the people involved in the project; during ensuing conversation. Northfield was mentioned by Smith as a good candidate for a host site for the training due to its rural nature and its proximity to the Twin Cities.

“I think it’s always good to bring in new perspectives and new training,” Smith said. “Something like this brings a national perspective, gets new ideas going. The response I’ve gotten from the folks attending has been overwhelmingly positive.”

Smith emphasized that there is a “definite no tolerance” approach to domestic violence in Northfield and the surrounding communities.

“This [the training] helps send a message to those who beat up on people weaker than they are: Northfield is not a good place to do that,” he said.

He said a large component of the training focused on what he called the “warning signs” of domestic violence and emphasized the need for officers to delve further into situations when called.

“We see a lot of those warning signs,” Smith said. “Often, abusers will ‘rehearse’ with their victims ... sometimes it doesn’t look like a big thing but nothing could be further from the truth.

“It’s not uncommon for abusers to kick the dog or another pet during a violent argument; we’ve seen cases where an abuser will clean his gun on the living room table while telling his wife what to do. We can’t just accept these things at face value, we have to dig into these situations more thoroughly.”

The training also discussed how dangerous domestic violence situations can be for responding officers — nationwide, more police are killed or injured when responding to domestic violence calls than any other single cause.

“A lot of times you’ve been in their homes already, sometimes multiple times in an evening,” Smith said. “There is a danger that officers will become complacent ... you’re taking a person who is essentially a control freak and a powermonger — suddenly there’s a person in authority telling them they can’t do that. They don’t respond well to that.”

Minnesota law requires an arrest as part of the response to domestic violence, Smith said. He added that for many abusers, a night (or more) spent in jail is a sobering experience and often causes them to re-evaluate their behavior.

“Spending a night in jail can have a profound effect on people,” he said.

More importantly, he said, the removal of the abuser from the situation gives the victim “breathing space” to decide what to do next.

“It’s incredibly sad, sometimes,” Smith said. “I’ve known of people who are living with suitcases packed, just waiting for a chance to escape.”

He said children are often the victims of domestic violence who suffer the most — even when they are not physically hurt — because they learn that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with problems.

Smith said again that violence is not acceptable.

“One of the phrases that turns my stomach is when I hear someone say a person ‘deserved to be hit,’” he said. “No one deserves that, ever. When someone calls us, if the officer goes out and sees evidence of an assault — even if the victim denies the attack — the abuser is going to go to jail. If they’ve demonstrated violent tendencies, they’re going to go to jail.”

Erick Sommers can be reached at (507) 645-1113 or esommers@northfieldnews.com