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Stricter Domestic Violence Laws Urged

State Report Details Attacks, Homicides Over Two Years

By Scott Rothschild

While releasing a report Wednesday that chronicled two years of sexual and domestic violence murders, including a recent incident in Lawrence, advocates for stronger laws to protect victims urged prosecutors and judges to get tough with offenders.

“The message should be, ‘I’m watching you like a hawk,’” said Deborah Tucker, executive director of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

Tucker, of Austin, Texas, was on hand as part of the release of a new Kansas report called “Beyond Statistics,” which provides details on homicides and attacks in Kansas from August 2004 to August 2006.

She said in areas where judges require domestic abusers to appear before them weekly, the incidence of violence decreases.

“The offender gets a clear message from the community that we know what you are doing, and we are watching every week,” she said.

Former Kansas Atty. Gen. Bob Stephan, chairman of the state Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board, said he had little patience for prosecutors who complain that domestic violence victims sometimes “won’t show up” to level charges or testify against their abuser.

Stephan, who said his mother was a victim of abuse from his father, said the key is to raise awareness of how pervasive the problem is and how difficult it can be for many women to come forward to accuse their abuser.

Twenty-one people were killed by their partners in 2005, 25 in 2004 and 15 in 2003, according to state statistics.

Sandy Barnett, executive director of the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, said the group compiled the “Beyond Statistics” report so the public would “know victims’ names, to remember their stories and to honor their lives.”

The report includes the death of Linda Begay, 37, of Lawrence, who died in August after she was beaten.

Begay's boyfriend, Christopher Belone, 35, has been charged in her murder. Belone had been charged twice before in recent years with beating Begay, but both times prosecutors said Begay was an uncooperative witness.

Her death sparked an ongoing debate in Douglas County about the best way to handle domestic violence cases, which are dropped more frequently than other kinds of criminal cases.

Dist. Atty. Charles Branson said his office is trying to contact victims and interview them even before charges are filed, instead of making a charging decision and waiting to subpoena them for court weeks later.

But a local domestic violence advocate, Sarah Terwelp, of Women's Transitional Care Services, has said Douglas County still lacks a communitywide approach to domestic violence.

Barnett, of the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, said society had come a long way in responding to domestic violence but added "there is more work to do."

Only 40 percent of Kansas counties provide timely crisis services, she said.

For victims, she said the coalition would work to increase legal and emergency services, and safe and affordable housing. For offenders, the group will work to increase resources for prosecutors to enforce sexual and domestic violence laws.

— *Staff writer Eric Weslander contributed information to this article.*

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