

# EMBRACING JUSTICE



A Guide for Jewish Clergy on Domestic Abuse  
2011 Updated Edition

published by

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JEWISH WOMEN INTERNATIONAL

*safe homes. healthy relationships. strong women.*

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A Guide for Jewish Clergy on Domestic Abuse  
2011 Updated Edition



*safe homes. healthy relationships. strong women.*

Dear Friends,

More than ten years ago JWI developed and disseminated the first edition of “Embracing Justice: A Resource Guide for Rabbis on Domestic Abuse”. Since that time the Guide has been updated and reprinted several times and has provided hundreds of clergy with the information, tools and resources to work with victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Parts or all-of-the guide have been translated into Russian, Spanish and Hebrew and it is used by clergy throughout North America, Great Britain, Australia and South Africa. Undeniably Embracing Justice has been an essential resource to Jewish clergy throughout the world.

Our newest resource, “Embracing Justice: A Guide for Jewish Clergy on Domestic Abuse,” is updated, shorter and meant to be a companion to the original “Embracing Justice.” The new guide offers key information and resources in a succinct and easy-to-navigate format. Our hope is that every rabbi and cantor will avail her or himself of the information and resources that are included in this version and that those seeking additional information will go to our website [www.jwi.org](http://www.jwi.org) and click onto the clergy information section.

Many people helped to ensure that we were including the essential resources necessary for clergy to work with victims, families and perpetrators. First and foremost we extend our thanks to Rabbi H. David Rose who so ably led this project, and the members of the Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community. We want to particularly thank Rabbi Richard Hirsh, Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, and Rabbi Ron Muroff for their contributions to this guide and the other members of the task force for the web resources they shared with us. In addition we are grateful to Nancy Aiken, director of CHANA: Counseling, Helpline & Aid Network for Abused Women, Baltimore, MD; Michelle Lifton, Project DVORA: Domestic Violence Outreach, Response, and Advocacy, JFS Seattle and Naomi Tucker, director Shalom Bayit, Bay Area Jewish Women Working to End Domestic Violence for their willingness to read and provide feedback on the guide.

Thank you for your commitment to helping to make the world a safer place for victims of abuse.

Sincerely,

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Deborah Rosenbloom  
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My Dear Colleagues,

We all know the verse; "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is spilled (Lev. 19:16)." Do we also know that one in four women in the United States is battered by her intimate partner in her lifetime? It is hard to believe that some of the men with whom we *daven* and share sacred times terrorize their families – and that many women in our communities live in fear. We, as Jewish clergy, have a unique and vital role to play in diminishing this plague in our society and in saving human life.

Interpersonal violence in families can take on many forms and ranges from abuse of our elderly, to abuse of a spouse or intimate partner, to abuse of our children. As clergy, we are often aware of the violence our families experience, but not always aware of how we can best intervene and provide support, and even whether we are required by law to take further steps. This short guide focuses on intimate partner violence, also known as domestic violence. Domestic violence takes place within all socio-economic, ethnic, racial and religious groups. It happens in the Jewish community. As a rabbi, I have seen domestic violence occur without regard to income level, occupation, social class or branch of Jewish life.

Rabbis and cantors have a window into the lives of families in our communities. We meet with families during times of both celebration and sadness, when the signs of domestic violence are often more pronounced. We have influential voices. We are entrusted with the responsibility to bring *kedushah* into the lives of those we touch. With proper training and awareness we can recognize the signs of domestic abuse and open doorways to safety and healing. We can raise our voices, telling perpetrators that we will not tolerate their behavior in our *kehillot*, and letting victims know that we can offer a place of refuge. As individuals who have the sacred task of sanctifying marriages under the *huppa*, we must be comfortable addressing this subject in our pre-marital counseling and in being a first line of defense for members of our communities.

We, the religious leaders of the Jewish community, must make our communities places of safety and refuge. The information in this brief booklet is designed to help us in this important work. I strongly encourage you to review its guidance, to keep it close at hand, follow up with training and to work with your local domestic violence agencies.

Jewish Women International, its Clergy Task Force Against Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community, and your local agencies combating domestic abuse stand with you in partnership to end this *hillul hashem*. The Clergy Task Force offers trainings, assistance and guidance for clergy; if you'd like to bring us to your community or clergy associations, please contact JWI.

Shalom,



Rabbi David Rose, Task Force chair

## What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse - also called intimate partner violence, relationship abuse, domestic violence, and partner violence - is a pattern of coercive behaviors used to establish power and control over an intimate partner. The first signs of abuse may be so subtle that the perpetrator is able to pass them off as expressions of “love.”

The range of coercive behaviors includes emotional, psychological and verbal attacks, physical and sexual abuse, and economic coercion. Isolation from family and friends is one of the powerful tactics an abusive person uses to control his/her partner. While only some of these behaviors may be criminal, all are psychologically and emotionally damaging, and instill fear or dread in the person being abused. It is important to know that the person abusing is not out of control – in fact, these behaviors are deliberately chosen to control his/her partner.

Those being abused and those perpetrating domestic violence can come from any socio-economic status, be any age, level of education, ethnicity, race, religion and level of observance. Relationship abuse occurs in all intimate partnerships, straight, gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender; the vast majority of domestic abuse is committed by men against women. Substance abuse and alcohol abuse are often correlated for both those being abused and those perpetrating abuse.

“I’m a doctor, he is a lawyer. I’m here to say that domestic abuse is an equal opportunity destroyer.”

## What is clergy’s role?

Clergy have a unique role in combating domestic abuse: To speak out; to listen; to strengthen spiritually; to refer to local resources; and to create safe environments within the synagogue. JWI’s “Needs Assessment: Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community” (2004) confirmed that clergy play an important role in supporting families experiencing abuse, and that women experiencing abuse are more likely to turn to clergy for support and guidance if she or he has publicly acknowledged that domestic abuse is experienced in Jewish homes and families.

You may well be the first person with whom the person being abused shares her experience. This is a sacred and potentially lifesaving conversation – a matter of pikuach nefesh. When a woman confides that she may be, or is, experiencing abuse, you do not need to be sure that abuse has indeed taken place in order to act effectively. But you do need to know how to create trust and security in the conversation so that you can provide support to her and make appropriate referrals to a direct service agency.

**TIP:** *Get to know the advocates at the direct service agency in your community – both Jewish and secular. Domestic violence advocates help the person being abused with safety planning, support groups, legal advocacy and other resources, often at no charge or on a sliding scale basis. Your relationship with the advocate will give you confidence when you make a referral – and you’ll be able to turn to the advocate for guidance in particular situations.*

**TIP:** *Don’t make the appointment for the victim – just give her the contact information. When she is ready to reach out for more help, she will know who to call.*

If she discloses the abuse to you, it is critical to:

1. Be protective of her safety. Keep her disclosure confidential. Do not disclose to the abuser that his partner has spoken with you, and do not share that information with others unless it is essential to her well-being.
2. Acknowledge her courage, and believe her. Consider that you may only be hearing a small part of a bigger story. Be non-judgmental, respectful, and assure her of the confidentiality of your conversation.
3. Be an active and empathetic listener— take her seriously. Do not rush her – allow her to tell her story at her own pace and do not interrupt her to go off to another meeting. Let her know that you are available for further conversations, if she so chooses.
4. Be aware of your own feelings, and control your visible and/or verbal reactions to what you are hearing so as not to upset, influence or silence her.
5. Assure her that she is not alone. Affirm her perceptions of the situation by sharing that similar experiences take place in other families, including Jewish homes.
6. Acknowledge that psychological and emotional abuse are debilitating and traumatic.
7. Assure her that she is not to blame – let her know that being abused is not her fault.
8. Do not rationalize the unacceptable behavior. It is best to remain neutral about the person who is abusing her and conceal your disdain.
9. Do not suggest or provide couple's counseling.
10. Be supportive but do not tell the person being abused what to do or what you would do in her place. Telling her what to do echoes her experience at home, and may also have unintended legal consequences. Hear what she wishes to do and help her to clarify her options.
11. Offer a referral to the domestic violence service agency with which you have a relationship so that she can make a safety plan and ask if she has friends or family who can be supportive.
12. Support and respect her decision to protect herself (and children) with financial assistance, emotional, social and spiritual support.
13. Assure her that Judaism does not condone abuse. Offer spiritual counseling, prayer and meditation as a way of supporting her.
14. Recognize that this initial conversation may be followed by a period during which you do not hear from her. It may take more time for her story to emerge. Do encourage further conversation but do not pressure her to schedule a follow up meeting. If she is still with her abusive partner, ask her how she would like you to follow up. Do not initiate contact without prior permission from her, i.e. do not call her, even on her cell, email or text her, or approach her in public.
15. Abuse generally takes place in private – when the abuse is public it may be a sign of increasing lethality. Guidance from domestic violence advocates and from the person being abused should be sought out.

**TIP:** *Do not suggest or provide couple's counseling! It will put the person being abused in greater danger.*

**SAFETY PLANNING** is the way a person in an abusive relationship minimizes danger and increases her safety. Whether a person is staying, leaving, has left the abusive relationship, or has left and returned, it's important to have a plan in case of further abuse. It is recommended that a person develops a safety plan with a domestic violence advocate. Safety plans try to protect the person being abused and her children at home, out of the home, at work, and at school.

Safety plans can address physical, emotional, financial and legal needs. Plans generally include securing important documents, keys and monies; establishing code words; planning escape routes; giving protective orders and photos of the person who has used violence to relevant parties; changing routines; documenting incidents; being aware of stalking; and creating a network of support.

**PROTECTIVE AND RESTRAINING ORDERS** are important legal tools that order the abusive person to keep a certain distance from the person they are hurting and may give temporary custody of the children to the non-abusing party. If a congregant has a protective order specifying that her former partner is not permitted to be near her and her children, then the synagogue and the nursery and/or religious school should have a copy of the order and be prepared to enforce it. Court protection is not a guarantee that the woman will be safe. Sometimes abusive persons increase their violence when the legal system is utilized.

## What are some barriers to recognizing & addressing abuse?

- Intellectually we may know that abuse takes place in Jewish homes, but confronting possible abuse in our midst is challenging.
- That the alleged perpetrator may be a member of our community – perhaps even a *macher* - makes it difficult to consider that he is abusive.
- Trained by Jewish tradition to give people the benefit of the doubt and knowing that “many couples argue” may lead us to minimize the seriousness of what is going on and prevent us from supporting the person being abused.
- The dynamics of the synagogue and competing interests may also affect our responses.
- Rationalizations like “everyone has a temper” or “maybe she’s just withdrawn” can blind us to the “red flags” that signal possible abuse.
- The abused may have become quite adept over time at hiding the abuse or accepting it.

## What are red flags that a person is experiencing abuse?

Reactions to abuse vary and there is no psychological profile that fits all persons experiencing abuse. Warning signs alone are not enough to categorically identify that a person is experiencing abuse. However, potential red flags that someone is in an abusive relationship are:

- She seems cautious or fearful in her partner's presence
- She mentions her partner's temper or anger
- She becomes silent or self-censors when her partner is present
- She shows extreme deference or a radical change of opinion after her partner shares his opinion, especially concerning life-cycle events
- She calls/texts her partner excessively
- She is increasingly isolated from friends, extended family and/or unusually isolated from the synagogue community
- She doesn't show up or cancels meetings frequently
- She has injuries or bruises, and may not feel comfortable explaining the source
- She wears clothing or sunglasses that are inappropriate to the circumstances and which appear to be covering up injuries or bruises

Those who abuse tend to hide their behavior from all but their immediate families, and participate in appropriate ways in other settings. Indeed, those who use intimate partner violence may even put great effort into cultivating pillar-of-the-community reputations. None of these red flags taken alone indicates that abuse is necessarily occurring. But a cluster of them should alert you to consider if abuse is taking place.

A person *could* be abusing his partner if he:

- Exhibits extreme and irrational jealousy
- Turns from sweet and caring to aloof and critical
- Dominates and/or controls the conversation when partner is present
- Makes humiliating, belittling or "correcting" remarks to his partner
- Makes personal decisions for his partner
- Makes all of the decisions vis-à-vis a life cycle event
- Excessively calls or checks on his partner.

"The red flags were all over the place, and... nobody thought anything of them... At one of our visitations our dad showed us a gun... We told the psychiatrist we were seeing, and his answer to us was, 'Your dad is not going to use that... this kind of thing doesn't really happen in these families.' But it turned out he was wrong. Ten days before my ninth birthday, my dad killed my mom at work."



## What are some barriers to leaving an abusive partner?

It is often difficult to leave the abusive partner and many times women will delay leaving, leave and return or not leave at all. Leaving or staying is solely her decision, and must be respected.

Some of the barriers to leaving:

- Partner's power and control over her
- Fear
- Danger of leaving
- Lack of money
- Lack of housing
- No safe place to go
- Isolation from supportive network
- Inadequate or no legal representation
- Fear of losing the children
- Concerns for safety of children
- Love and commitment for her partner
- His promises to change
- Feelings of shame
- Community and family pressure to stay and 'try and work things out'

## How should you reach out if you suspect domestic abuse?

**Reaching out to a woman may be a lifeline! Even if she initially responds that everything is fine, she will know that someone cares about her. She will know that she is not alone.**

1. Discreetly pay attention to her, but do not do anything out of the norm. Find ways to raise your concern with her in a sensitive and secure manner that does not arouse suspicion on the part of her partner – perhaps invite her to be part of a committee or to help plan an event. Safety, privacy and confidentiality are essential.
2. Communicate that you are asking out of concern, that you are someone with whom it is safe to talk, and that you are available to provide support, resources and referrals.
3. Rather than asking, “Are you being abused?” share what you have noticed, giving specific examples. Tell her you are concerned about her and that you are available for support and resources.
4. Recognize that she may choose to seek help from another member of the clergy, a friend or relative, or a direct service agency. What is important is that she knows she is not alone – do not underestimate the power of what you did.
5. Male rabbis should offer names of female rabbis who can provide support, in case the person being abused would be more comfortable talking to a woman. Male rabbis should initiate this offer and not wait for it to be raised.

As a cardiac anesthesiologist, Amy managed the anesthetic care of patients undergoing triple-valve operations so when her husband, a lawyer, became violent, she thought she could fix that too. As the violence escalated, he would shove her, drag her by the hair, page her incessantly at work, keep her awake all night, and threaten to kill her if she left with their daughter. She still went to work and in the changing room of the hospital, her colleagues turned away so as not to see her bruises. Even after her mother-in-law called the police, Amy went home again. A friend finally connected Amy with a lawyer, and she got a temporary restraining order against her husband and filed for divorce and custody. The proceedings took 1 ½ years and cost her \$200,000. When the sisterhood in her synagogue sponsored a big health fair, Amy asked if she could talk about domestic violence. The response was, “I had cancer and I don’t go around telling people.” Amy said, “I was beaten up for 10 years and I feel compelled to talk about it.” Publicizing her story has helped countless women.

## How are children affected by domestic abuse?

Millions of children witness their fathers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends or partners abusing their mothers. While adults may think that the children do not hear or see the violence, the children are in fact acutely aware of it. **Children who witness violence may suffer severe emotional and developmental difficulties similar to those of children who are direct victims of abuse, and may also be victims of physical and/or sexual abuse themselves.** They are also at risk of developing impaired brain functioning and cognitive development, low self-esteem, depression, anti-social behaviors, behavioral and attention problems in school, delinquent behavior in adolescence, and violent behaviors in adulthood. Abused parents are often unresponsive to child witnesses because of their own fears. The trauma of growing up in a violent home impacts a child's sense of safety and ability to bond, often causing mental health and substance abuse issues.

## Are clergy mandated reporters of child abuse?

Because of the close connections between domestic abuse and child abuse, you may suspect that the children are themselves being abused. Questions often arise about whether clergy are mandated reporters - legally required to report child abuse. In most states, members of the clergy are specifically mandated by law to report known or suspected instances of child abuse or neglect, but sometimes a clergy/penitent privilege applies. (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010)

Legal advice should be sought regarding mandated reporting; local direct service agencies will also be able to provide guidance. For a quick overview of your state's regulations visit [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/clergymandated.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/clergymandated.cfm).

## What is elder abuse?

Our population is aging and prevalence studies show that elder abuse is a serious problem for older adults, and occurs in all communities, socio-economic, racial and ethnic groups, including in Jewish families. Like other abuse, elder abuse includes physical, sexual, psychological and financial exploitation. Examples of financial exploitation include cashing an older person's checks without authorization, forging a signature and misusing or stealing the older adult's money or possessions. Neglect is an additional component to elder abuse and includes a refusal or failure to fulfill any part of a person's obligation or duties to an older adult. The perpetrator may be an intimate partner, a caregiver who is a relative or a professional, a family member or a guardian appointed by a judge. As cantors and rabbis within synagogue settings, chaplaincies and community organizations, you are most likely seeing many elderly people on a regular basis and can be a source of help for victims of elder abuse.

Most states require that elder abuse and neglect be reported to the appropriate authority, such as the state's Adult Protection Services Agency or the Commission on Aging.

## What is clergy's role when the person engaging in abusive behavior is a congregant?

Clergy may face additional challenges when the person engaging in abusive behavior is a member of the congregation. It is not clergy's role to "out" a person who is abusing his partner. Confronting him may be dangerous for his partner and for you. If 'outed' he may try to manipulate and intimidate you, as well as minimize the violence. Consult with a local direct services provider for guidance on how to proceed and how to refer the person to counseling and/or a batterer's intervention group, if appropriate.

Withholding a get is a form of abuse particular to the Jewish community. **It is appropriate for clergy to talk to the husband about the get and then to proceed thoughtfully**, perhaps in consultation with the local *beit din*/rabbinical court, to determine what tools you have at your disposal to encourage him to give the Jewish divorce.

## Spiritual Healing

In addition to the toll that intimate partner abuse takes on one's body, mind, and heart, abuse is also an assault on an individual's spirit, personhood, and soul – on the neshama. The physical wounds caused by domestic violence deserve medical attention; emotional/psychological hurt may be eased through therapy; damage to one's neshama can be named and encountered with the help of clergy.

As individuals we each live in relationship to self, to others, to the world and to the Divine. These crucial relationships remind us that we have intrinsic worth and value. The isolating and demeaning nature of abuse is destructive to each of these human interactions and to one's sense of inner self. The betrayal and belittling that are part of the suffering caused by domestic violence constrict the soul and break the spirit. The importance of spiritual healing from abuse or violence inflicted by those whom we once trusted cannot be overestimated. Feelings of betrayal are not usually limited to what one person has done to us; we tend to feel betrayed by the world, by life, by God. It takes determination and practice to heal a broken spirit.

Here are some tools, both ancient and contemporary, to help a woman toward *shleimut*.

### Sacred Listening

The most important thing we as clergy can do is to listen intently to a woman's story. The isolation of abuse causes a tremendous sense of being unheard – unheard not only by her partner but by friends, community and even by God. Telling her story takes great courage, and we may be the first to hear it; our listening is a sacred, spiritual task. By simply listening we have validated her experience and allowed her soul to expand. Sitting with those who have been abused, learning about their spiritual practices and beliefs, and communicating our feelings of hope help individuals to summon their inner resources.

## **Blessings and Prayer**

When spoken by clergy, simple phrases; “May God bless you” or “May God give you strength” or similar blessings have great healing power. By asking the person who has suffered from abuse, “What would you like to pray for?” we can be guided in offering prayers on her behalf. She might say “strength” or “freedom” or even “healing for my abuser,” and we can then adapt the *mishaberach* formula to include her prayerful wishes. “May the One who blessed our ancestors...bless \_\_\_\_\_ with strength (freedom, etc)...”

Reciting and/or discussing some of Birchot Ha-Shachar (“Praised are You...who makes me free ... who releases the bound”) can lead in some cases to an understanding that God is with her and does not wish her to suffer.

## **“Tehillim”/Psalms**

These can also bring comfort with their uncanny ability to name what we are experiencing, especially when we are feeling wounded. Ten psalms identified by Rebbe Nachman as ‘healing psalms’ have been collected in *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength and Solace in Psalms*, (Rabbi S. Weintraub, 1994). Contemporary healing prayers are included in *Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration*, by Rabbi Naomi Levy (2003).

## **Music**

Listening to music and singing prayers and songs can be healing and listening to them together with the person experiencing abuse can be an uplifting experience. Visit [www.jwi.org/clergy](http://www.jwi.org/clergy) for examples of healing music.

## **Mikvah**

In recent years *mikvah* rituals have been created to address a variety of needs, including healing from abuse. Examples of these rituals can be found at [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org) and [www.mayyimhayyim.org](http://www.mayyimhayyim.org)

## **Rituals**

Many who suffer abuse can find spiritual strength in daily or weekly spiritual practices, especially those that were part of their lives before the abuse. It can be helpful to explore with the abused rituals and practices that help create an island of sanity in the midst of chaos and/or isolation. Examples: traditional observance; Shabbat candle lighting or prayer; meditation, yoga, exercise and mindful breathing.

Remember that our presence as spiritual caregivers affirms the inherent kedushah of those we counsel and brings the hope of Jewish tradition. Our listening is an assurance that the abused is valued and that it is a distortion of our tradition for one person to abuse another.

## What can the synagogue do if both parties are congregants?

There are special challenges for clergy and synagogues when, after separating, both parties remain members of the congregation. (In some communities, synagogues partner with each other so that the two individuals can attend different synagogues once they have separated). The situation can be even more complex if the person who engaged in domestic violence holds a lay leadership position, as he may have influence over the clergy's contract, and board of trustees. Life-cycle events where both parties may be participating can be difficult emotionally and potentially dangerous. A protective order must always be honored, even if this means that the person who engaged in domestic abuse cannot participate in the event. Even without a court order, if the person who was abused is fearful or feels isolated, the synagogue can and should help her feel more comfortable. For example, a small volunteer committee, whose members can be trusted with protecting confidentiality, can be organized to support the abused woman. If she typically drives to synagogue, a volunteer can accompany her to her car to reduce the risk of being stalked in the parking lot. To help her feel less alone at services, volunteers can sit near her and to talk to her during the Kiddush.

Please consult a member of JWI's Clergy Task Force if you are confronted with these or similar situations.

## What else can a synagogue do to create a safe environment?

In addition to responding to an individual or family experiencing abuse, it is important to address the issue within the context of the congregation and larger Jewish community. Indeed, the ability to respond effectively to individuals is related to the context of the community. You can raise awareness about the issue and make it known that your congregation/community and its professionals are working to prevent abuse and support:

- address domestic violence in sermons
- publish bulletin articles on the topic
- hold workshops on healthy relationships for youth and adults alike
- hang educational posters on communal bulletin boards
- post crisis hotline phone numbers in public restrooms
- raise the issue as part of pre-marital counseling
- train staff on their legal and ethical responsibilities

Acknowledging the reality of domestic violence often prompts those who have experienced abuse to share their experiences with someone they trust.

**Several congregations have been developed policies regarding domestic violence**, including written guidelines for professional and lay leaders in their own interactions with adults and children, and to govern leaders in processing allegations of abuse against professionals, lay leaders or members. These policies help avoid the need to react in a crisis and also help depersonalize responses. In the process of creating policies, it's important to involve mental health professionals, attorneys, and survivors of domestic violence, in addition to lay and professional leaders.

Please visit JWI's website for more information and to share resources you have developed with us.

## National Hotlines

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) available 24 hours a day/7 days a week.

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) available 24/7 for the nearest rape crisis center.

National Stalking Resource Center: 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255) M-F 8:30 AM - 8:30 PM EST or email [gethelp@ncvc.org](mailto:gethelp@ncvc.org).

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 (1-866-331-8453 TTY) available 24/7

For more information about domestic violence and a resource directory, please visit JWI's website [www.jwi.org/domesticviolence](http://www.jwi.org/domesticviolence).



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