

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought changes to many aspects of our lives over the past 12 weeks. Included in those changes is an increase in isolation due to restrictions on social interactions, an increase in general feelings of anxiety, and the stress of job loss for many in our community. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in striking trends in crime as well. Fewer people out and about over the last 12 weeks resulted in a temporary drop in virtually all crime categories. One exception to this was domestic abuse. Between January 1st and May 31st of this year, Benton County Sheriff deputies responded to 45 calls of domestic abuse. This number represented a 31% increase over domestic abuse calls for the same time period in 2019 and the end of a 3-year decline in domestic abuse calls. Sandy Nadeau is the Director of Development and Communications at Anna Marie's Alliance, our local shelter and victim service center in the St. Cloud area for victims of domestic abuse. Nadeau confirmed that the number of victims seeking assistance from their programs at Anna Marie's has been constant throughout the pandemic.

The increased prevalence of domestic abuse calls is not the only concern among law enforcement and advocates. Stay home orders, closure of public accommodations, and job loss or working from home meant victims were spending more time with their abusers. According to Nadeau, calls to their domestic abuse victim hotline have been down significantly. Nadeau's attributes this drop in telephone calls to victims having reduced ability to spend time in private away from their abuser. The pandemic has also meant fewer opportunities for friends, family, or community members to interact with victims to observe signs of abuse or offer help. While stay home orders did specifically exempt those who needed to leave their home for personal safety reasons, connecting with those personal safety services sometimes presented challenges. For a domestic abuse victim, the decision to leave an abusive situation is difficult and dangerous under the best of conditions. The closure of community services and need to implement social distancing requirements represented yet another barrier for victims to overcome. Advocacy services have also been impacted by the pandemic, as COVID-19 has forced Anna Marie's staff to conduct more of their services over the telephone.

If you or someone you know is a victim of domestic abuse, help still exists in our COVID-19 world. Law enforcement continues to respond when we receive reports of domestic assault. Once on scene, we make arrests where possible and work with victims to connect them with advocacy services to keep them safe. Advocates from Anna Marie's Alliance are available over the telephone or in-person with social distancing accommodations to assist victims in making safety plans, finding shelter, and meeting other basic needs. Victims or those concerned for victims are encouraged to contact their local law enforcement agency or advocates at Anna Marie's at 320-253-6900. Advocates are available at Anna Marie's on a 24/7 basis.

If you suspect someone you know is a victim of domestic abuse, reaching out to them during this pandemic is more important than ever. Providing them with information about services available to assist them could be the first step on a long journey out of an abusive relationship.

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.