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Tuesday, October 3, 2017

Advocates Seek State Assistance As Domestic Violence Deaths Increase

Advocates for domestic violence victims are calling on the state to invest in resources so that fewer deaths are reported in the future.

Their pleas came Tuesday during a Statehouse press event recognizing October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month in Ohio.

During the event, the Ohio Domestic Violence Network released last fiscal year's findings regarding intimate partner violence. The number of fatalities increased to 114 from 101 that were reported in Fiscal Year 2015-16 and 87% of domestic violence incidents involved guns, which is up from 73%.

While a handful of bills have been introduced this General Assembly to protect victims of domestic violence and more harshly punish abusers, Ohio is still lagging in terms of financial investments to combat the issue, said ODVN Board Chair-Elect Bridget Mahoney.

"The programs to help victims and the programs to provide prevention are underfunded," she said. "Ohio's response to domestic violence has to get better."

State-dedicated funding to address domestic violence is \$7.5 million on average throughout the U.S. However, unlike surrounding states, Ohio doesn't have a budget line item dedicated to domestic violence prevention and victim assistance, she said.

A provision to devote \$100,000 for a domestic violence program through the attorney general's office was included in earlier versions of the biennial budget (HB 49), but was removed before it got to the governor's office.

"This has to become more of a priority. We need the state of Ohio on our team because everyone has a right to a...violence-free life," Ms. Mahoney said after Akron Police Detective Ron Kennedy shared the story of his sister, who was killed by her husband last year.

ODVN's most recent efforts to quash domestic violence including using federal grants to relocate survivors and collaborate with universities to do an in-depth study aimed at prevention violence on college campuses, Executive Director Nancy Neylon said.

It's also continuing to back legislation to expand protection orders (SB 7 & HB 1), increase penalties for protection order violations (SB 171), and prohibit abusers from owning firearms (HB 305 & SB 151).

"All of these legislative missions are vitally important to ensure protections for victims of perpetrators of domestic violence," Ms. Neylon said.

She also applauded a recently enacted measure (HB 63) that added six years to prison sentences for individuals who commit assaults that disfigure or permanently disable victims.

Sponsored by Rep. Jim Hughes (R-Columbus), who also spoke at the event, the measure was inspired by Judy Malinowski. A day before lawmakers approved the bill, she died from injuries sustained after her ex-boyfriend poured gasoline on her and lit her on fire.

Franklin County Prosecutor Ron O'Brien announced Tuesday he plans to seek the death penalty in that case.

At the Statehouse event, ODVN also recognized Mansfield Municipal Court Judge Jerry Ault, Central State University and Paul Mitchell, The School, for their efforts to assist victims and prevent domestic violence.