

Program successfully teaches domestic violence victims safe use of technology

March 3 2009, By Joel Schwarz

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new Washington state program designed to help victims of domestic violence increase their knowledge of how to use technology safely and help minimize the risks that technology can pose when one is in an abusive relationship has been evaluated as highly successful.

The Technology Safety Program, developed by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, was judged to be needed, useful and effective by Jerry Finn, a University of Washington Tacoma professor of social work who also evaluates the effectiveness of human services programs. The program also was judged to be very helpful by nearly 500 women who tested the program at 18 locations throughout Washington. The program, according to Finn, can be easily adopted for use in other states or nationally.

"Victims of domestic violence often are reaching out through technology to gain access to information, services and support, often without understanding how that same technology can be used to track and monitor them. This program educates victims on Internet communications, cell phones and global positioning systems and keeping their personal information safer," said Finn.

"Domestic violence is built around control, not anger, and an abusive partner often limits a woman's access to information and support. Monitoring computer activity is one of many ways to control a spouse. In a shelter a woman needs to keep her identity secret, but a fax number

can be tracked to her location. Abusive partners also can track their victim's cell phone calls or can use a keystroke logger on a computer to intercept and read e-mail. This program shows women ways in which they might be monitored and steps they can take to prevent being stalked and tracked."

Finn noted that cyber stalking and the use of technology is increasing, but the safe use of technology can be empowering to women seeking to escape an abusive relationship.

Findings from the evaluation came from 479 domestic violence victims ranging in age from 15 to 74. The women were predominantly white (67 percent) or Hispanic (17 percent) and three-quarters of them had children. Twenty-five percent had their browser history monitored, 24 percent had been repeatedly threatened, insulted or harassed by e-mail, 18 percent had someone monitor their e-mail and 17 percent had someone use their password or PIN number.

Staff members at the 18 participating agencies, primarily shelters, were given training in the program, which was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. How the program was delivered at each agency varied slightly, but women who participated viewed a Powerpoint presentation. It included information about technology safety, what could happen to a person and how to prevent such things as identity theft, revealing their browser history, how to be safe in a chat room, how to set up an e-mail account without using their real name and how to protect them from being followed with a GPS device.

Part of the training included a section on Internet safety for parents with children. Abusers often communicate with or search for a victim's children through social networking sites or other online venues. Children sometimes post location information such as the town they live in or the school they attend, potentially compromising the family's safety. The

program helps parents talk to their children about safety when using chat rooms, not meeting someone they met on line or not divulging personal information online.

Some agencies also provided individual follow-up sessions and some also offered women training to help improve their computer and technology skills.

Finn said satisfaction with the program was high with 86 percent of the women reporting high satisfaction and 10 percent saying they were somewhat satisfied. However, he said it is unknown how much of this information the women used after the training.

In addition, he said the program met its three primary goals of increasing domestic violence victim's knowledge and safe use of communications technology, reducing the risk posed by abusers by teaching women about technology safety and privacy and increasing women's ability to help themselves and their children through the use of technology.

He noted that a number of the women expressed interest in helping other domestic violence victims receive the same kind of training.

"These women are reemerging after being severely restricted and technology is a way of communicating with the rest of the world. It is very therapeutic to be a helper, and it would be a good use of resources to have women who learned these skills to teach the next group of women entering shelters," said Finn.

The evaluation also suggests that technology safety be addressed in all domestic cases that are evaluated.

"It must be part of the assessment process in every case. We talk about safety and two of the questions asked should be 'What technology

devices do you use?' and 'Is it possible your partner monitors your use of these devices?' The most dangerous time for a woman is when she plans to leave a violent partner. Her plans can be intercepted if she uses a computer, cell phone or other technology," said Finn.

Co-author of the paper published in the on-line edition of the Journal of Family Violence is Teresa Atkinson, technology safety program coordinator of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

The Technology Safety Project was tested at agencies in Davenport, Pullman, Yakima, Newport, Wenatchee, Cathlamet, Hoquiam, Kelso, Walla Walla, Spokane, Vancouver, Forks, Bellingham, Snohomish, Bellevue, Mount Vernon and Renton.

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