

DA offers domestic violence awareness workshop

■ Training offered to those who work with crime victims

By JOHN PAPE
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October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month across the nation and the Fort Bend County District Attorney's Office and Community Response Team will be jointly sponsoring a workshop to promote community awareness and provide training about domestic violence issues.

The annual workshop is a training opportunity for individuals, agencies and organizations that assist, advocate or work with victims of domestic violence. The session will be held Oct. 26 at the Stafford Centre.

Featured speaker for this year's workshop is Mark Wynn, a nationally known consultant on family violence. Wynn, who has been qualified as an expert witness on domestic violence issues in both state and federal courts, has been featured on such television programs as *Oprah*, *Dateline* and *NBC World News Tonight*.

Carol Rees, public information officer for the Rosenberg Police Department and a member of the Community Response Team, said the workshop helps to ensure that victims of domestic violence get the help they

need.

"Domestic violence is a very serious problem, and this seminar brings together law enforcement, prosecutors, local women's centers, probation personnel and others involved in the handling of domestic violence cases. This not only heightens everyone's awareness, it helps to make certain that everyone involved in this process is knowledgeable and fully equipped to handle domestic violence cases," Rees said.

Vita Rogers, executive director of the Fort Bend County Women's Center, said that her facility is seeing an increase in the number of victims of domestic violence.

"We believe that there may be several factors involved in that increase," Rogers said.

Rogers pointed out that the population of Fort Bend County is growing at a rapid pace, and with additional people come additional incidents of domestic violence. Efforts in recent years to raise community awareness about domestic violence may also be contributing to the increase.

"There is more awareness now and (victims) realize that there is help out there for them. They know that they don't have to put up with it, and that they can be safe," Rogers explained.

Rogers also pointed out that domestic violence is not confined to any particular segment of society, but crosses all socioeconomic lines.

The center served 519 women and children at its emergency shelter in 2005, a 40 percent increase compared with 2004. Hot line operators fielded 23,346 calls last year, a nearly 50 percent increase over the previous year.

In 2004, the latest year for which statistics are available, Fort Bend County law enforcement officers were dispatched to 2,033 domestic violence incidents.

A woman typically returns to her abuser seven to nine times before she leaves for good, according to information provided by the center.

Kelly Pedone, development and public relations specialist for the center, noted that the shelter offers emergency housing, counseling, housing assistance, job-skill training, employment assistance, legal advocacy and child care. All are provided at no cost.

Center statistics also show that women were not the only ones seeking help in 2005. Thirty percent were males.

Of the center's clients last year, 45 percent were Hispanic, 34 percent were African-Americans, 14 percent were white, 2 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 5 percent were categorized as "others."

Fifty-three percent reported an annual income of under \$5,000, 13 percent had incomes of between \$5,001 and \$10,000, 25 percent were between \$10,001 and \$25,000, 7

percent were between \$25,001 and \$50,000, and 2 percent reported an income of more than \$50,000.

Statewide, deaths attributed to domestic violence were up 20 percent in 2005, according to Jitin Hingorani, assistant media director for the Texas Council on Family Violence. There were 143 reported fatalities in 2005, up from 116 in 2004.

Harris County reported the

greatest number of fatalities with 30, while Fort Bend County reported one death. A 42-year-old Richmond woman was shot and killed by her husband in an apparent murder-suicide in November 2005.

Anyone interested in more information on the domestic violence workshop can contact Rees at 832-595-3739 or Terri Pringer at the District Attorney's Office at 281-238-3260.