

National coverage brings domestic violence to forefront

NFL cases bring visibility, teachable moments, says Women's Center director

By Brian Huber
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WAUKESHA — The recent string of allegations against NFL players accused of domestic violence underscores that such abuse is common, but it also provides an opportunity to teach children about healthy relationships, said Angela Mancuso, executive director of The Women's Center in Waukesha. "It provides a platform for

advocates to talk about solutions, interventions, crisis responses, and that is a good thing. What we want people to remember is domestic violence, sexual assault, we want communities to pay attention every single day and not just when there's a salacious, high-profile celebrity case," Mancuso said. "In Waukesha County, every day there are women and children living in fear, living with violence, men living in fear and

violence, and families every day in our own community." Mancuso cited statistics showing as many as 1 in 3 homes are affected by domestic violence and an FBI stat showing a woman is beaten in America every 13 seconds on average — and that doesn't include verbal, financial or psychological abuse. District Attorney Brad Schimel said in 2012, there were 972 domestic abuse arrests in Waukesha County, and "that's kind of a

typical number." He said his office strives to file domestic violence cases as quickly as possible, usually within seven to 10 days of getting a referral. "Because we recognize in Waukesha County if you are going to be murdered ... odds are it's going to be domestic (in nature)," he said. "Even when there is not a murder, there can be

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serious harm and often just incredible power and control that is leaving one partner in a relationship really kind of emotionally trapped.

"Whenever there is a homicide and it's domestic, we are very concerned. Had there been a history that we'd known about, we could have done something."

Schimel said the most concerning cases are those where one partner exerts some type of power or control over the other.

"We don't have a crystal ball. We are doing the best we can to try to predict these behaviors," he said.

Why not just leave?

It is common for people to wonder, when hearing about domestic abuse, why the alleged victims don't simply leave their abusers. That only is blaming the victim and making things worse, Mancuso said.

"It's not that simple," Mancuso said. "There are numerous reasons why women will stay in an abusive relationship. ... Every situation is unique and distinct. The victim knows herself better than anybody else. She knows what she's going through and she knows what is the right timing and it comes down to her decision. And sometimes no decision is a decision. ...

"First off, women often want the violence to end, not the relationship. They love their partners, they have children, there's economic rea-

sons, cultural and religious reasons, fear, peer pressure from maybe family members or friends to just stick it out."

Schimel added that domestic violence cases can proceed even when victims decline to cooperate.

"It is actually with some frequency, not most cases, but with some frequency we do move forward with some prosecution even against the wishes of a victim because hopefully your readers will understand there are many reasons why a person who wants to continue to live in that home will not want to continue prosecution against an offender," he said.

Reacting to the news

Ray Rice, who was cut by the Baltimore Ravens and suspended indefinitely by the NFL after a video of him striking his then-fiancee, Janay, in an elevator was released, drove much of the conversation last week. But other players since have been named as having domestic or child abuse charges against them: Adrian Peterson of the Minnesota Vikings, Greg Hardy of the Carolina Panthers and the arrest of Ray McDonald of the San Francisco 49ers.

Mancuso said Janay Rice raised a good point.

"Mrs. Rice is correct it was a complete and utter invasion of her privacy, and when the video was leaked out, so to speak, it violated her rights. Every time she picked up a newspaper or turned on a TV, that's revictimizing and it can cause a lot more harm and damage," she said.

"It's an awful situation and

the video should not have been sensationalized the way it was. There is a lot of victim-blaming that goes on in our society and the fact she chose to marry him and stick it out with him, that is solely her choice. As a community I don't understand why we focus so much on why she did that. As a community we should be focusing on how he changed his behavior."

But she also said the stronger penalties imposed by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell were a step in the right direction.

"I will give them accolades, but I will also say what took so long? This is not new," Mancuso said. "They were slow to the table to address

something as prominent and as prevalent and as serious as domestic violence but the point is they did finally get there, they are paying attention to it."

But just as some are demanding accountability from the NFL for how it handled the Rice matter — initially a two-game suspension until the video was released — Mancuso said accountability is necessary for all abusers, such as enrolling in a batterer's treatment program.

Breaking the cycle

Schimel said as bad as domestic violence is for victims, it is often compounded when witnessed by children.

"There is a very powerful and difficult-to-break cycle of violence where children who witness domestic violence will often grow up to commit it themselves or put themselves in relationships where they are victims of domestic violence," he said.

"I think most people would say it makes sense where kids grow up to be the example they saw. That's part of what has us very concerned about domestic violence because it often gets passed on to the next generation."

Mancuso said the recent news coverage of domestic violence cases can be used as a teachable moment without replaying the infamous elevator video, simply by talking

to children about healthy responses to conflict.

"Using violence and force is a choice. And it's a learned behavior. ... Parents can play a very critical role in helping children identify responses," Mancuso said. "Especially since people idolize professional athletes, young boys and young girls want to be like professional athletes ... to tell them your role model's behavior is not healthy or appropriate, it's a crime, and then why did they choose to do that and focusing on conflict resolution.

"Love shouldn't hurt, basically, and that's a good message to give to kids."

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