

The Issue

“A woman’s life was controlled by her husband, her every move monitored. After five years and two children, her husband suddenly snapped, brutally beating her. She was in the hospital for four weeks recovering from the severe head injury and knife wounds. After leaving the hospital she made the difficult choice to relocate with her children to Wisconsin (WI) to be near her family. Indianhead Community Action Agency’s (ICAA) Legal Assistance for Victim’s (LAV) program attorney helped her file for divorce in Wisconsin while he was serving time for the abuse. He demanded 50/50 custody and placement of his children after he was released. Through the LAV program she was able to get sole custody/ primary placement, rebuild her life and finances, and to find a permanent home for her children.”

This story is typical of the domestic abuse and violence that many women experience in Wisconsin’s northern counties. With the help of attorneys that Indianhead Community Action Agency has supported since 2011 with funding from the federal U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, the Wisconsin Trust Account Foundation, and other private donations, more than 1000 victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence have been helped through Indianhead’s LAV program. Free legal services have included filing protection orders, obtaining divorces and child custody, placement, and support, and gaining financial protection. Safety plans have been created and clients have received assistance in obtaining resources and services including employment, healthcare, child care, etc. Most importantly this program has ensured safety and independence of victims and their children.

An acute need exists for this program given that low-income women in abusive relationships rarely have any options and/or resources to secure the help needed to escape their violent realities. Research shows that victims of DV are never free from being subjected to further abuse and violence and that the abuse experienced impacts other areas of their lives¹ and especially their children.² For some, the LAV program has potentially resulted in lives saved. This is a major impact, given that prior to our LAV program, survivors had little or no legal representation for these types of cases. Our program has enabled children to be removed from situations where they continually witness abuse against a parent. In removing children from this hostile environment, their exposure to domestic violence is limited and the potential for them to either become a victim or abuser when they are adults is significantly reduced.

“A female client was married to a man who physically abused her weekly. He would often punch her and has attempted to strangle her. They had a very small child together, but she was frightened to leave him because he would threaten to take the child away from her and leave her penniless. She had no friends or family in this area. With the help of Indianhead’s LAV attorney this woman and her son were able to move back to her family, hundreds of miles away in a different state, and to get a fresh start with a support system surrounding her. She is now receiving a substantial amount in child support and her share of the money from the marital home that he retained. She now has the independence she needs to live confidently and freely without having his constant watching eye and control.”

¹ Rothman, E. F., Hathaway, J., Stidsen, A., and de Vries, H. F. (2007) How employment helps female victims of intimate partner violence: A qualitative study, *Journal of Occupation Health Psychology*, Vol 12(2), p.136-143.

² Moylan, C. A., Herrenkohl, T. I., Sousa, C., Tajima, E. A., Herrenkohl, R. C., and Russo, M. J. (2010). The effects of child abuse and exposure to domestic violence on adolescent internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, *Journal of Family Violence*, Vol 25(1), p. 53-63.

How You Can Help

- The list of government programs on the possible chopping block under the current administration includes the Violence Against Women grants in the Department of Justice. The office that handles those grants had a \$480 million budget in 2016 and currently oversees 25 grant programs that help women who have been victims of domestic violence. Indianhead has relied on funding through the OVW for its LAV program. Contact your federal legislators (senators and congress representatives) to let them know that Violence Against Women grants are critical to the safety of women and children, and to support continued funding.
- Familiarize yourself with the Power and Control Wheel and other wheels developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP) to understand warning signs for domestic violence and abuse. Use the Power and Control Wheel, at the following link, to inform and educate yourself, family, and friends about the warning signs for abusive behaviors. <http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html> and then take appropriate action if you suspect abused. Don't be afraid to SPEAK UP!
- Consider a donation to Indianhead Community Action Agency's LAV program to support funding so that we can continue to provide free legal services to victims of domestic. You can do a secure donation on-line at ICAA's website or send a check to ICAA, P.O. Box 40, Ladysmith, WI 54848 with LAV in the memo line.