

Domestic Violence Walk sheds light on one of region's largest problems

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - In 2017, the Alton Police Department has responded to more than 500 domestic violence calls, and that number is growing.

Last year, the department received 574 domestic violence calls. As many as 55 involved intimate partner relationships, according to a release from Alton Police Chief Jason

"Jake" Simmons. Oasis Women's Shelter Executive Director Margarette Trushel said the problem expands beyond Alton, saying as many as 1,400 emergency orders of protection are filed in Madison County every year - an average of five a day. She also said as many as 350 cases of domestic battery or violations of those orders of protection are filed within the county every month. To make matters worse, Trushel said the rate of child abuse in Southern Illinois is nearly double the national average.

To combat these troubling numbers, Simmons and his wife, Shelly Simmons, created the annual Domestic Violence Awareness Walk. This year, the walk began at Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church Thursday evening. Survivors of domestic violence, community members and activists walked down to the Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater following speeches from Jake Simmons, Madison County Judge Richard Tognarelli, Madison County Judge Sarah Smith, Alton Mayor Brant Walker and Advantage News journalist Melissa Meske, who herself is a survivor of domestic violence.

"She did a great job," Jake Simmons said of Meske. "I reached out to her and asked if she could speak at the event. She was a victim of domestic violence for years."

The event was created after the murder of Courtney Coats, a 30-year-old woman who was dismembered by her boyfriend and thrown into the Illinois River at Hardin. After that 2014 incident, Jake Simmons said his wife told him more would have to be done to solve this crisis, and the Simmonses took the challenge. Jake Simmons said his wife worked with him, Alton Deputy Police Chief Terry Buhs and his wife, Barb Buhs, to make the event a continuing and growing success.

"It has grown every year," Jake Simmons said. "When we started, we had 30 people come."

That number has grown to nearly 100 with this year's event. Jake Simmons said four Alton Police officers directed traffic in the interest of walkers' safety during the event. Once they arrived at the amphitheater, the group joined in a short prayer and concluded the event. It lasted from 5:30-7:15 p.m., Jake Simmons said.

Each year, money is raised by the event by charging \$10 per walker. That money is distributed to organizations in the area for use in domestic violence prevention. While the amount of money may ultimately be scant, both Jake Simmons and Trushel agree the main purpose of the event is to bring awareness to the problem of domestic violence, the resources available for people wanting to escape it and the amount of survivors willing to offer support.

"It brings attention to the issue, because most people don't know how much there is," Trushel said Friday morning. "It's a very big problem in the Riverbend. The walk provides a forum for survivors to come out and walk. That's part of the healing process. It's impressive to see the chief leading that group of people down the street. He is the only chief in the State of Illinois to sponsor such an event."

Another area first, or second in this case, is Judge Tognarelli's domestic violence accountability court in Madison County. Trushel said the court is the second of its kind in the state, and not only provides aid and justice to the victim, but also provides treatment and counseling for the perpetrator of the violence. It provides 26 weeks of education for them.

"When you teach a person who has been violent how to be non-violent, you affect their lives and the lives of their family and everyone who loves them," she said. "They learn - if they want to - how to prevent that violence in the future."

Most importantly, however, Trushel said people should take away silence from abuse. She said people witnessing incidences of public child abuse don't always confront the situation, believing it to be "none of their business." Quite the contrary, Trushel said any incident of abuse should be reported, adding if someone is abusive in public, they are probably even worse in private.

If you or anyone you know may be a victim of domestic violence of any kind, here is a list of hotlines available. Trushel said each line would be capable of helping people find ways out of bad situations, report violence and discover resources.

- Oasis Women's Center - (618) 465-1978, or toll-free at 1-800-244-1978
- Illinois Domestic Abuse Hotline - (877) 863-6338
- National Domestic Abuse Hotline - 1-800-799-7233
- Illinois Sexual Abuse Hotline - (618) 397-0963
- Child Abuse Hotline - 1-800-252-2873
- Elder Abuse Hotline - 1-800-252-8966