

Senators Push For Salon Workers To Be Trained To Spot Signs Of Domestic Violence

December 18 2023 9:49 AM



WASHINGTON — Nashville hairstylist Susanne Post didn't come to terms with her own abusive relationship until she confided in another person.

“It was when someone said the words, ‘This is abuse,’ that I actually took the time to research and find out what that was outside of the physical signs,” she told NBC News in an interview Wednesday.

Knowing first-hand how tight-knit the relationship between cosmetologists and their clients can be, Post turned her trauma into healing and launched Shear Haven, an online course that teaches salon and barber shop workers how to spot signs of domestic abuse.

From physical traits of abuse, such as thinning and patchy hair or bruising, to less obvious signs of a controlling partner, she said, stylists are “uniquely positioned” to recognize the warning signs.

“It was something that was close to my heart as both a beauty professional and as a survivor of domestic abuse,” Post shared. “I really saw the value in having someone who has close relationships with their clients ... who they’ve developed friendships with year after year, month after month.”

Her program has since inspired a statewide law mandating domestic violence prevention training courses for salon professionals across Tennessee. Illinois and Arkansas have similar laws, and now a bipartisan duo in the Senate wants to make it available across the United States.

Sens. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., and Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., are introducing legislation Monday — [the SALON Stories Act](#) — that would incentivize all 50 states to implement what has worked so well in theirs. The bill provides grant money to states that require aspiring cosmetologists to take a domestic violence prevention training course to obtain their licenses.

“Salons are great places for women to have conversations that they wouldn’t sit down to have with male colleagues, that they wouldn’t have at a lunch meeting,” Blackburn said in a joint interview with Duckworth in the U.S. Capitol.

“It’s a safe space,” Duckworth added, “But also, they can see you: The bruises that you are hiding, they can see when you’re flinching from a touch, they realize when you have a sore mark. And so it’s the combination of those two things that allow to be in a very unique position to spot the signs of domestic violence.”

Under their legislation, each state that receives federal grant money could select their own training courses to be implemented by nonprofit organizations in their area.

Domestic violence often goes unreported; only about half of cases are reported to police, according to the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#). As many as 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men suffer physical violence from an intimate partner, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

To launch Shear Haven, Post worked with the YWCA in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, a nonprofit organization that operates the state's largest domestic violence shelter. Together, they created a 20-minute curriculum that is targeted toward the beauty community but is free to all.

The Shear Haven course has trained beauty professionals worldwide, with an estimated 100,000 people having completed the instruction since its inception in 2017.

“We actually have seen lives being saved by this legislation,” Sharon Roberson, president of YWCA Nashville and Middle Tennessee, said in an interview Wednesday. “You have a special relationship with your stylist and they are in a position to really help individuals to be safe because they are not taught to really understand the nuances of domestic violence, to know what what is safe to do and not safe to do, and this really educates them and gives them the resources that they need.”

Those taking the course learn which questions to ask and how to direct victims to the right resources.

“As a salon owner, I had seen many instances over the years of that meant so well that would respond in a way that they thought was caring but giving really, honestly, terrible advice,” Post said. “With this training, we’re making it very clear that they are not to be the therapist, but just to truly be a friend and teach them how not to respond, as much as how to respond.”

The lesson also covers nonphysical signs that a client may be experiencing abuse at the hands of a controlling partner — such as when clients are not allowed to change their hair color or appearance or when abusive partners display signs of jealousy and accompany clients to each appointment.

Taylor Stewart, owner of Nashville-based Lash Remedy, took the Shear Haven training and has used it at her own salon, working with employees to spot the warning signs of domestic abuse in their clients. When she entered the beauty industry at 18, she didn't expect to be an outlet for victims of domestic violence, but she now provides discreet resources tucked away in the studio's restrooms and website.

Like Post, Stewart said she was in an abusive relationship when she first began her career.

“It’s so not about the services I’m providing. It’s about this space that I’ve made for women to be safe and to me, that is so important and so powerful and such a huge reason of why I do what I do and absolutely not the reason that I started doing this job,” Stewart said in an interview.

Duckworth and Blackburn say more states need to adopt similar programs.

“This was an opportunity for us to say to our colleagues, our states have had these programs and they’re working well ... Let’s not mandate, but let’s incentivize other states to come in and participate in this program and provide this training,” Blackburn said.

The duo liken their new push to existing efforts that have helped victims experiencing sex trafficking and other violence.

“For example, if you go to a bar today and you go to the women’s restroom, there are signs to help victims of sex trafficking and here’s a hotline to call,” Duckworth said. “Bartenders know how to look out for women when they see someone spiking their drinks. Flight attendants. Airport bathrooms. So this is just a logical next step.”

“This is a no-brainer. It’s so logical,” she added.

If you or someone you know is facing domestic violence, call the National Domestic Violence hotline for help at (800) 799-SAFE (7233), or go to www.thehotline.org for more. States often have domestic violence hotlines as well.