

A Woman's Place, other domestic violence organizations adapt as victims cooped up with abusers amid pandemic



GREELEY, CO – NOVEMBER 17: A brochure for A Woman's Place, an organization serving survivors of domestic violence in Weld County, is seen in Greeley Nov. 17, 2020. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)

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Colorado domestic violence shelters and organizations including A Woman's Place in Greeley have been forced to do more with less as the COVID-19 pandemic rages on.

Diane Heldt, executive director of A Woman's Place since January 2019, said Colorado is no exception to the nationwide increase in domestic violence since the pandemic began.

"Our peak was in April," Heldt said. "We got twice as many calls in April than we had gotten any (month) in 2019."

Heldt said the shelter hit maximum capacity and had to turn away 82 people that month. They've stayed busy since and expect another increase through the end of the year as the virus spreads across Colorado at the highest rate it ever has.

The pandemic has added pressure on domestic violence organizations as shelters have had to reduce capacities while more survivors have been stuck in close quarters with their abusers. Brooke Ely-Milen, domestic violence program director at the Colorado Department of Human Services, said they saw fewer reports of domestic violence when Colorado was under the Stay-at-Home order in late March, but a dramatic uptick once the order was lifted suggested there wasn't a drop in actual domestic violence.

“People weren't really reaching out for help and services, and then once those orders were lifted, many programs reported seeing a surge in hotline calls,” Ely-Milen said. “We always want to make sure that people are aware that help is out there.”



Woman's Place distributed yard signs to raise awareness as the pandemic shut down community events where the shelter would typically do community outreach. (Diane Heldt/For Greeley Tribune)

Even when officials haven't explicitly ordered people to stay home, health experts have consistently warned people to avoid large gatherings and reduce their social contacts to prevent spreading the virus. Initiatives like working from home and remote learning have meant a huge increase in the amount of time many are spending at home. Though many people associate home with safety, those subjected to domestic violence are faced with even more opportunities for abuse.

“Home is supposed to be a safe place, but it’s not a safe place for everybody. Sheltering in place in a situation that’s abusive is really dangerous, and I think that’s predominantly why we’ve gotten so many calls,” Heldt said. “Every time somebody is escaping abuse, it’s dangerous. COVID just adds one more level of stress to that.”

Ely-Milen explained there are two primary ways to look at risks in domestic violence situations: life-generated risks, the kind of risks faced by most people, which can be weaponized by abusers, and batterer-generated risks, the physical and psychological risks associated with the abuser. Just as COVID-19 added life-generated risks for many people, causing some to lose jobs and struggle financially, it’s added more opportunities for abusers to assert power and control.

“For example, a partner could use the pandemic as an excuse to bring a weapon into the home,” Ely-Milen said. “The pandemic itself became a tool for abusers to create more fear, to create more power and control over their partners.”

Heldt said she’s heard of a variety of issues created by the pandemic that add to the need for the shelter. As schools have closed, opened, re-closed and re-opened and quarantined various cohorts of students, parents are forced to adapt at almost a moment’s notice. Closures and heavily reduced capacities of social spaces have resulted in lost jobs and income, adding to financial stress for many.

“We’ve had people share a variety of different issues like that with us,” she said. “It adds extra layers of access problems for survivors.”

With many health experts urging Americans to hunker down for the next few weeks, Heldt and others providing support to domestic violence survivors want to make sure the public knows there are still ways to access support services. A Woman’s Place has a free crisis line available 24/7 at (970) 356-4226. Anyone struggling with domestic violence or who knows someone struggling with domestic violence should call the crisis line, Heldt said.

“They can talk directly to an advocate free, confidentially and get some support around a safety plan, figure out what their options are,” she said. “We serve female, male, people with kids, transgender, whoever the survivor is, whatever their barriers are, we strive to be really inclusive.”

Advocates at support organizations can help those in need enroll in services such as counseling or court-based advocacy, Ely-Milen said. Whatever the survivor’s need, leaving an abusive partner is always a process and not something that happens easily, “pandemic or no pandemic,” she added.

Heldt said A Woman’s Place has stayed open by working closely with a variety of local leaders, other safe houses in northern Colorado and Violence Free Colorado. They’ve taken a number of safety precautions to prevent an outbreak at the shelter,

including requiring masks, prohibiting visitors and not accepting donations of physical items.

The pandemic not only restricted the amount of physical space the shelter had to work with, but put a wrench in the shelter's fundraising efforts this year. Heldt said they had to cancel a spring cornhole tournament fundraiser and move their annual fundraiser gala online. Community outreach has also been a challenge, with community events canceled. But A Woman's Place adapted with yard signs for Domestic Violence Awareness Month, as well as flyers they distributed to local businesses to put up in bathrooms or other locations.

Those looking to help can send cash donations and gift cards to A Woman's Place, PO Box 71, Greeley, CO 80632.

"We believe that everybody deserves to live a life free from violence," Heldt said.



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