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COVID-19 BRINGS AN INCREASE IN SEXUAL ASSAULT, SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
Local organization offers support and resources

WORTHINGTON, Minn. — On Monday, Minnesota Governor Walz reported that two-thirds of police calls over the weekend were related to domestic violence. As individuals are coping with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 virus, loss of income and staying in their homes, the stress can be overwhelming. Abusers often resort to the use of manipulation, power, control and violence, correlating to higher incidence of sexual assault and exploitation.

In Southwest Minnesota, the rural landscape already lends itself to isolation. Add to that calls for social distancing and stay-at-home orders, and there is a perfect storm for escalating instances of both domestic and sexual violence. The staff and advocates at the Southwest Crisis Center provide critical assistance to individuals experiencing domestic and sexual violence and as critical sector workers, will continue to provide those services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

“April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and while we’re certainly drawing attention to that abuse, we’re also preparing to help those who might be in a vulnerable situation due to domestic concerns,” said Sara Wahl, Executive Director of Southwest Crisis Center. “We know that the stay-at-home order and this time of uncertainty is going to increase anxiety, anger and frustration and when that happens, individuals and families are at risk of physical harm at the hands of others.”

The Southwest Crisis Center is raising awareness this month about sexual assault and how communities can respond to reduce the occurrence or to encourage reporting and support. Survivors of sexual assault or domestic violence have access to a 24-hour safe line to report incidents or seek resources.

“It’s important to believe someone when they disclose that they have experienced sexual violence,” said Kari Voss-Drost, Assistant Director, Southwest Crisis Center. “You can be aware of how your friends and family are behaving and be supportive. Often the best thing someone can hear is, ‘I believe you. Thank you for sharing.’ We’re here to help those who experience sexual violence.”

The month of April will be recognized for five weeks with a different strategy for each week.

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Week 1 – Start by Believing Campaign Launch

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. You can help support survivors by making a “Start By Believing” sign, take a selfie, and post it on social media with #SWCCStartByBelieving. Let your friends know you are here and present to support survivors and ready to start by believing.

Week 2 -- Day of Action -- Teal Tuesday, April 7, 2020

Wear teal, the color of sexual assault awareness and prevention. Wearing teal -- whether it's a ribbon, shirt, or other accessory -- will serve as a conversation starter for important issues like consent, respect, and supporting survivors. Share a selfie of your teal look using #SWCCStartByBelieving.

Week 3 –School Gear

Do you understand what consent is? Giving consent and asking for it? Learn more about healthy boundaries, how to give/receive consent and what the policies are for reporting sexual assault or harassment at your school. Wear school gear and share a selfie using #SWCCStartByBelieving.

Week 4 – Rock the Talk

Talk with children and teach them about consent, healthy relationships and trust in age appropriate terms (for ages 12 and under). This is something that can be discussed broadly by adults and caregivers. Check out the resources at www.themamabeareffect.org. Color a free poster with your child and post a picture of it using #SWCCStartByBelieving.

Week 5 – Denim Week and Denim Day April 29, 2020

Wear jeans with a purpose, support survivors, and educate yourself and others about all forms of sexual violence. Participate in Denim Day April 29th. Donate \$5 (or more) to help support survivors and share a selfie in your denim using #SWCCStartByBelieving. There is a free T-shirt giveaway too.

Southwest Crisis Center serves residents of Jackson, Cottonwood, Nobles, Rock, and Pipestone counties who are or have been victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, sex trafficking, sexual harassment, stalking, and child abuse.

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