

# Rural Librarians and Domestic Abuse

by Sara R. Benson\*

Domestic violence has long been a problem in rural areas where access to transportation, shelters, and other services is often limited. And yet, there often is access to a local public library, where safety, resources, and security reside in the form of private computers, informational books, and, of course, librarians. This article suggests that rural librarians can serve as a point of access to services for domestic violence victims.

Domestic violence occurs more frequently in rural than urban areas at a rate of 22.9% (rural) compared to 15.5% (urban).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the percentage of women killed by their male intimate partner is higher in rural compared to urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, women in rural locations suffer more profoundly due to a lack of community-based services. Domestic violence shelters provide victims with critical services, such as legal, economic, and emotional support. Yet, shelters are usually located in more populated city centers. “In Illinois, for instance, a state where 74 out of the 102 counties are rural,<sup>3</sup> fewer than half of the counties have designated domestic violence shelters.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, “rural libraries, unlike rural domestic violence shelters, are relatively abundant.”<sup>5</sup>

Rural librarians can provide important assistance to domestic violence victims, provided that they do not run afoul of rules on the unauthorized practice of law. Here, a bit of background is necessary on the unauthorized practice of law rules. Generally, unauthorized practice rules protect consumers of legal services from receiving ill-informed legal advice and protect the status of lawyers as a profession.<sup>6</sup> However, with the lack of legal services available to the many

working class families, new relaxed rules for limited licenses to practice law are beginning to develop. For instance, the Washington State Bar recently established two limited legal licenses—one focused on real estate closings and the other focused on family law matters.<sup>7</sup> Due to a similar need for legal services in the area of domestic violence, legal advocates trained in helping domestic violence victims in most states can participate in the legal system without violating rules on the unauthorized practice of law. For instance, in Illinois, legal advocates can help victims prepare forms for court, accompany victims to court, and even sit at counsel table to support the victim during hearings.<sup>8</sup>

One option, then, is for rural librarians to attend the training necessary to become a domestic violence advocate. In Illinois, legal advocates for domestic abuse victims are required to undergo a minimum of 40 hours of training.<sup>9</sup> Most likely, this is asking a bit too much. In an age where funding is tight and resources need to go further, asking librarians to spend more time in training that is unrelated to librarianship would be likely fruitless. And yet, with some training and collaboration between rural libraries and police, as well as the State Bar Association, miracles can happen for domestic violence victims in rural areas. One such program was established in Surrey, England, through the Surrey County Council Libraries. The Surrey County Council Libraries have “forged links between the library service with the police, borough and district councils, Crimestoppers and the Surrey and Sussex Probation Service” as well as working to increase “awareness of domestic abuse amongst County Council staff.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, in the United States, rural librarians (with some training) could understand how best to assist victims to access resources. The librarian, for example, could direct the victim to legal assistance and shelter websites, help find books and pamphlets of interest to the victim, and potentially, even provide programming for the children

if the victim needs time to think about his or her options while doing so. Next, the librarian could help facilitate travel between the library and the shelter (especially if the nearest shelter is the next county over) and work with police to provide transportation across county lines. Finally, the librarian could help engage with the shelter staff via telephone and arrange for the arrival of the victim and his/her children at the shelter.

If the State Bar is able to provide services to rural individuals at the library itself, like a program run through the Library Liaison Project in ten counties in rural Eastern Michigan,<sup>11</sup> attorneys could provide legal advice to the victim at the library. Similarly, the attorney, if able, could represent the victim in court in order to obtain an order of protection and, if necessary, a divorce. In the Library Liaison Project, the legal service provider also “developed information kiosks at each library site, with informational brochures, pro se materials and forms, and informational materials on recurring legal problems.”<sup>12</sup> This kind of informational outreach could be tailored to domestic abuse victims in rural libraries.

The possibilities for assisting rural victims of domestic abuse at rural public libraries are endless. They are limited only by rules on the unauthorized practice of law and the time, energy, and talent rural that librarians are willing to extend to this vulnerable community.

## End Notes

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3. Soc. Impact Res. Ctr., 2004 Report on Illinois poverty: An analysis of rural poverty 4 (2003), Available at [http://socialimpactresearch-center.issuelab.org/resource/2004\\_report\\_on\\_illinois\\_poverty\\_an\\_analysis\\_of\\_rural\\_poverty\\_1](http://socialimpactresearch-center.issuelab.org/resource/2004_report_on_illinois_poverty_an_analysis_of_rural_poverty_1) [<https://perma.cc/UK3K-FT62>].

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*membership.html* [<https://perma.cc/7S3E-SRQ2>] (containing a map of the Illinois counties as well as locations of domestic violence program providers within each county)).

5. Benson, *supra* n. 4, at 247.

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9. 750 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. § 60/227(a)(2).

10. *Libraries Change Lives Award Past Winners & Finalists*, Chartered Inst. of Libr. & Info. Prof. (Mar. 14, 2013). Available at <http://www.cilip.org/uk/cilip/advocacy-awards-and-projects/awards-and-medals/libraries-change-lives-award/past-libraries>.

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12. *Id.* at 46. ■



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