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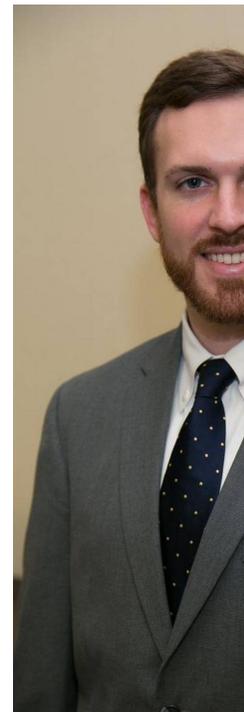
Legal aid is big help to survivors of domestic violence

HIGHLIGHTS

Super Bowl 50 today is a reminder of the toll of domestic violence

989 died to such violence in Washington during 1997-2014

Providing an attorney can reduce domestic violence victims by as much as 21%



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BY ISHBEL DICKENS
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Special to The Olympian

As we approach Super Bowl 50 today, let us recognize the anecdotal claim that the highest rates of domestic violence occur on Super Bowl Sunday.

Research is unclear about this specific claim, but the high frequency of domestic violence incidents in the NFL and the league’s response to these incidents serve as an example of how the mainstream culture sanctions domestic violence, devalues women, and fails to keep our communities safe.

In Washington between 1997 and 2014, there were 989 deaths as a result of domestic violence. It is unlikely that one policy will end domestic violence, but there is one service that is proven to have a positive impact on the lives of survivors and their families – civil legal aid.

Research shows that providing an attorney can reduce the number of domestic violence victims by as much as 21 percent. A 2015 study out of King County found that when survivors received legal representation they were 85 percent more likely to have child visitation rights denied to the abusing parent, 77 percent more likely to have restrictions placed on the abusing parent’s child visitation, and 47 percent more likely to have treatment ordered for the abusing parent.

Most incidents of domestic violence do not lead to criminal prosecutions. Violent incidents often lead to a host of legal problems that affect a survivor’s access to basic needs and safety. Frequently, survivors face civil legal issues related to protection orders, child custody, housing, healthcare, education, divorce, and finances.

Unlike criminal prosecutions, where a person is constitutionally guaranteed an attorney if they cannot afford one, most low-income people must navigate their civil legal issues without an attorney. For survivors who are unable to afford representation, this often means that they lose their legal battles and are unable to escape from their abuser without losing access to basic needs.

The 2015 Civil Legal Needs Study Update found that low-income Washingtonians who have suffered domestic violence or sexual assault experience an average of 19.7 civil legal problems per year, most of which arise from their victimization.

Can you imagine? As if trying to protect your family from an abuser was not enough, research shows that survivors are fighting an uphill legal battle to find safety, economic security and residential stability as they escape from their victimization.

There are many variables to successfully transition from an abusive relationship; we know that access to civil legal aid results in positive outcomes for survivors. If we are to ensure that civil legal aid is available to all victims of domestic violence, we must invest in it.

Ishbel Dickens is chair of the Washington State Supreme Court's Access to Justice Board, and Jay Doran is the education director of the Equal Justice Coalition, a civil legal aid advocacy organization.

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