

The MILFORD DAILY NEWS

Knowing is half the battle: Woman works on behalf of domestic violence victims

By Sara Withee / News Staff Writer
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MILFORD -- When Loriann Pallaria began working with domestic violence victims in Milford District Court, many in her hometown's immigrant circles complained she was interfering in private matters.

"In the beginning, people would come up to my parents and say, 'Your daughter, what does she think she's doing?'" Pallaria recalled. "Now, my parents are like, 'Our daughter, do you know what she does?'"

Four years later, Pallaria and her parents aren't the only ones spreading the word about her work **for Wayside Youth & Family Support Network**.

From women Pallaria has helped to police officers she works alongside, Wayside officials say the organization's message is being promoted to more victims than ever in its dozen years in Milford -- progress they say is worth celebrating as Domestic Violence Awareness Month is observed this October.

"Awareness has been increased throughout the whole Milford community," said Carol Wayne, director of Wayside's Trauma Intervention Services.

Pallaria, 33, joined Wayside four years ago, when a community member who knew she was Portuguese and spoke that language and Spanish recommended her to the organization.

The Framingham-based nonprofit group had received funding through the federal Violence Against Women Act and the state to improve its SAFEPLAN program in Milford District Court with an advocate fluent in the area's minority languages, Wayne said.

Pallaria spent six months working in the community before a woman finally trusted her enough to seek help obtaining a restraining order, Wayne said. But a second soon followed, then a third.

"When someone who spoke their language and was well-known in the community in respectful ways started working there, it opened up an avenue that was before completely closed to them," Wayne said.

Wayside wanted to get further down the avenue, though, because while domestic violence calls to police kept rising, many victims were not seeking restraining orders at the courthouse, Wayne said.

"The police would come and do what they needed to do, but there was no one here to make the connection," Wayne said.

Another three-year grant Wayside obtained two years ago through the Violence Against Women Act helped on this front by putting Pallaria and another civilian advocate -- first Lisa Almeida and now Liliana Cosquete -- in the police station during the week, Wayne said.

Pallaria said she now reaches victims earlier by accompanying officers on domestic disturbance calls, following up with victims and helping women who come to her because they feel their situation is escalating.

"When you first come to see me, it's not to get a restraining order," Pallaria said. "It's to basically do some safety planning and empower someone and give them education about what their options are before they decide to take the next step."

Pallaria never knows what to expect from victims seeking safety planning.



Civilian police advocate Loriann
Pallaria.
(Allan Jung photo)

"Some are embarrassed," she said. "Some have already empowered themselves and know exactly what they want. Some are very fearful."

Victims from Milford's immigrant families need strong outreach, Pallaria said, because domestic violence in their home countries is often overlooked by the law and kept quiet out of shame.

"If you're being assaulted, physically assaulted by your spouse, no one's going to do anything about it," she said. "It's your spouse."

Pallaria is ready to set them straight, although many times the victim cannot be persuaded even after several visits.

"It's empowering them," she said. "I can't tell them 'you have to do this, this and this.' I have to give them their options."

Giving victims their options at the police response stage helps should the situation eventually land in court, Pallaria said.

Pallaria said she can make the ordeal easier by instructing those seeking restraining orders what parts of the abuse they must describe to the judge as she stands by their side and preparing court staff.

"You have someone who knows everything about their situation beforehand so they don't feel like they're going to be victimized again by retelling their story, going before a judge," Pallaria said.

Pallaria said Milford police have been key to her success and the entire department has become more aware of how to help those being abused. Officers responding to calls inform victims of their rights and Milford Police Chief Thomas O'Loughlin came up with the idea of asking the town's hotels to house victims in emergency situations, she said.

"They've made me feel I'm part of them, I'm part of their team and the chief has been unbelievable in supporting this program," Pallaria said.

O'Loughlin said officers are motivated to help victims because they see Pallaria respond. Before, the hierarchy of the state's social services web didn't always bring timely action, he said. "Eventually, it's human nature that you go in and you don't see those things. Now the officers go in and look."

O'Loughlin agreed that along with looking, his officers are educating victims on their own at times without Pallaria being there.

"It's more holistic," he said. "It involves police officers wearing those social services hats that we should wear, but having those professionals as a resource."

Pallaria said she recently realized just how deep she and the department have reached when a woman she worked with a few years ago -- whose trust initially took months to gain -- called her up and said she was having problems again with her partner.

"She picked up the phone and said, 'My first thought was to call you.'...She realized she's not going to be treated this way," Pallaria said.