

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

A phrase promoted within the last decade regarding terrorism and public safety is, "If you see something, say something". The point they are making is for citizens to report suspicious behavior or items that may pose a danger to the public. I am hoping Homeland Security won't mind if I appropriate that phrase for use in the never-ending battle against domestic violence.

The Sagadahoc County Working Group on Family Violence is initiating a campaign of public awareness and attention on the issues of domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse with an emphasis on encouraging the public to report instances of these offenses when they witness or are made aware of such cases. The Working Group has been an active organization in Sagadahoc County for 12 years with a goal of reducing violence in the family at any level. Throughout the years we have developed and rolled out several programs and initiatives to help towards this goal. This public awareness campaign is our next such effort.

Many cases of domestic violence reported to local police are done so by bystanders, neighbors, co-workers and family of the victims. For a variety of reasons, the victim is unwilling or unable to report the offense with third parties the only source available to do so.

Have you ever observed a man and woman arguing in public? Have you heard banging or hollering coming from a nearby residence? Have you seen an adult dragging an apparently reluctant child out of a store? Each could be nothing or they could be crimes taking place in your presence. What would you do? What should you do? That is the purpose of this article and the upcoming campaign initiated by the Working Group.

It occurs to me that a significant obstacle in reporting suspected abuse or violence is knowing and understanding exactly what is domestic violence. I am sure many people have witnessed something that caught their eye but asked themselves; is what I am seeing violence and or is this a crime?

A brief review of Maine Law is in order. Under Maine Statutes, the definition of an assault is: A person intentionally, knowingly or recklessly causes bodily injury or offensive physical contact to another. Of course for an event to be considered a domestic offense the parties must fall within specific guidelines of relationships.

Say that out loud; offensive physical contact. That is all it takes for something to be considered an assault. I agree this is quite subjective as what one person feels is offensive another might not. In fact I have had victims of domestic abuse report to me that because they weren't injured or required medical attention, they didn't consider it an assault. This is despite being victimized in such ways as being slapped, punched, kicked, tossed around or simply roughed up. I attribute some of this as a veil attempt at minimizing their partner's conduct while others truly associate an assault as having to suffer some sort of injury.

The purpose of this article and for our initiative is to simply implore each of you to report abusive conduct to local law enforcement. Yes, some of what you report will turn out to be

nothing at all or perhaps something just short of criminal conduct. For those who are reluctant to report for fear of bothering police or sending them on false calls, I believe most officers would be relieved there is no crime after responding to such a call. For those instances where there is something going on, your report may have prevented something very serious from taking place. The response of officers to a call like this also sends a very powerful statement for the participants that the public is watching.

As we roll out our public awareness campaign this fall, I encourage you to seek additional information on domestic violence and do your part by reporting what you feel is suspicious behavior or criminal conduct.

While compiling this article, the news of an entire family in southern Maine killed by what is being labeled as domestic violence homicide was made public. This event took place in an apartment building with plenty of neighbors surrounding this family. Is it possible a neighbor might have heard something or suspected something was wrong within this household? It is hard to believe someone didn't. Don't be that person who saw something and didn't report it only to regret it afterwards.

As I mentioned earlier, the Working Group is taking this on as our fall initiative. In doing so we have signed on with a national movement in this field called NO MORE. From their web site: NOMORE.ORG, they describe the movement as "A unifying symbol designed to galvanize greater awareness and action to end domestic violence and sexual assault." The web site further explains the NO MORE campaign was developed because despite the significant progress that has been made in the visibility of domestic and sexual assault, these problems affecting millions remain hidden and on the margins of public concern. NO MORE calls on all of us together to end the silence and speak out against the violence experienced by people of all genders, races, ethnicities and age groups.

I want to close with a quote from 18th century statesman Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."