

3. HOW ADVOCATES AND SHELTERS CAN HELP – FOR RURAL AND OTHER WOMEN

The person who can help you sort out your situation is likely to be an advocate at a local hotline or shelter. If you can't reach a local advocate, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233) TTY: 800-787-3224 (www.ndvh.org). Making the call doesn't mean you will be expected to go to a shelter. You don't have to be in seriously physical danger to get help from an advocate. It is her job to help you do what you think is best. That could even mean starting with the question of whether you are abused, if you are not certain. If that is the situation, the advocate can help you assess whether you are in physical or emotional danger.

Why Talk to an Advocate?

A domestic violence advocate has the kind of experience you most need. She has learned from her training. She has also learned from listening to other women in situations similar to yours. She understands that you are the one who knows most about the abuser. An advocate can ask questions that encourage you to appreciate your best qualities. Talking with her can enable you to find the strength to solve your problems. Combining her broad experience and your specific information, you can work together. You can figure out the best way to reach your goals.

But maybe you are afraid an advocate won't understand your situation. You say to yourself:

“But I'm different. I'm an immigrant. I don't speak English.”

“I'm Deaf.”

“I have all these physical disabilities.”

“This is just the way things are in my rural/ethnic/religious community.”

If any of those statements resembles the way you talk to yourself, you probably are “different.” Different from the mainstream. But you are also very much like many, many abused women. Your advocate will know about challenges and opportunities for an abused woman in your community. She can tell you how likely the police are to respond quickly to a 911 call. That can be crucial, for instance, in a rural area. She will know what their general attitudes are toward women who are battered. She may also know how they usually treat immigrants. She might know their attitudes toward people with disabilities. Or women who have several children and rely on public assistance. If she doesn't have the information, she will know how to find it. If she doesn't offer, ask her to refer you to someone who does know. She should also have information on places to go that specialize in serving women who speak English as a second language or with

difficulty. She can refer you to other services that are particularly suited to what you need.

An advocate will rarely give you advice. But she can help you evaluate the degree of risk you face. She might ask what you want to happen. Many women want two important things. They hope to stay with their partner and they want to be safe. Discussions with an advocate might enable you to decide which is most important. It could help you see how you can make it happen. She might ask about what you have already tried to increase your safety. What has worked? What hasn't? Can you change the tactic so it works better? If you try that, might it put you in more danger? As you hear your own answers, you gain new perspectives.

Your new perspective may make you realize you are in danger and that you need to make a safety plan. Click here: [The Importance of Making a Safety Plan](#). Having such a plan in place is very important. You can follow one of the those on the web, but it is important to modify it to fit your own special situation. For instance, most Safety Plans advise you to call 911. But if you live in a rural area, it may take a long time for an officer to reach your home, or he may be your husband's cousin or his best friend. Either situation could increase your danger. If you have experience in "talking him down" so he is less dangerous, that might be a better guideline to put into your Safety Plan. An advocate, who understands your situation and your community can help you make such decisions.

An advocate can help you think through other basic questions, as well. You may want to be safe, but also to keep your relationship. With ideas from the advocate you can list advantages and disadvantages of each choice, weighing the risks of each. Maybe you'll decide that you have to choose between your relationship and your safety. Then you might set a new goal, and the advocate can help you identify the first steps to reaching it.

Exploring the option of a shelter

Gathering information about shelters does not mean you ever have to use the information. Knowing your options is an important part of your Safety Plan, in case you have an unexpected emergency. Even if your partner has never been very violent, that can change. Abusive people often become more dangerous over time. Sometimes that happens gradually, so you have warning. But it can be sudden too. Having an emergency plan is like having a fire escape or an alarm system. You don't expect trouble, but you want to be protected – just in case.

An advocate can help you find the nearest and safest shelter. Even if that seems an extreme idea, it might feel good to know it's possible. If something happens so that you have to go to a shelter, the advocate can arrange it. She will know you and what you need, so if necessary she can help explain that to the shelter staff. Maybe it's access to a language interpreter. It could be kosher food, legal information or a private place to pray.

If you have talked to an advocate ahead of time, she will probably have a place in mind that can provide what you need.

In some areas the shelter is a big house where several women live for short periods. An advocate may be able to give you information about legal options or to find you someone else who can do that. Other areas have Safe Homes where one woman and perhaps her children stay in a private home. They may be welcome for a week, a month or longer. The hosts may be very well informed about abuse. At the very least they are all in touch with people who have expertise on abuse. Their most welcome trait might be an ability to listen. That could be just what you need.

Probably no one really wants to go to an emergency shelter. But it is a place to stay for only a short time, and it can give you an essential time out. It is a safe environment where you can re-evaluate your situation. You will meet other women whose situations are similar to yours. You can exchange information with them and get ideas for how best to be safe. Advocates are on hand to talk to you about legal and medical options, how to get help for children, housing, Safety Plans and more. A shelter can save your life.

Adapted from Getting Free (<http://www.powells.com/>)