

Police, prosecutors and victim advocates worry coronavirus stay-at-home order will cause spike in domestic violence

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Phone calls made during business hours to [New Beginnings' help line](#) for victims and survivors of domestic violence have fallen off somewhat since the local outbreak of the coronavirus began a month ago.

The head of the Seattle non-profit doesn't see that as good news. She's worried it's an indication that people holed up at home with their abusers are more isolated and less able to reach out for help — and likely in even greater danger as the crisis unfolds.

"We have every reason to believe abuse is escalating at this time," said Susan Segall, New Beginnings' executive director. "For any of us that see our homes as a sanctuary, it's profoundly distressing to think of being home-bound when you're being abused."

Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday that the two-week stay-at-home order he issued March 23 may be extended beyond this week. The closure of schools, libraries, bars and restaurants, retail stores, and non-essential businesses, along with the ban on large gatherings, has upended every aspect of normal life.

For victims of domestic violence, the crisis is cutting them off from their social-support networks and leading to an increase in 911 calls, said Detective Patrick Michaud, spokesman for the Seattle Police Department.

Michaud said the volume of 911 calls for domestic-violence incidents went up 22% between Feb. 29 and March 13, with 614 calls compared to 502 calls during the same two-week period in 2019. But he said most of the calls didn't result in arrests because officers found no crime had been committed.

"The vast majority are just arguments. People are stuck at home, tensions rise and the cops get called," Michaud said. "We still get that home isn't safe for everyone and the message to stay home can be terrifying for domestic-violence victims. Anxiety and fear

can be compounded and social-distancing can magnify the feelings of isolation that a lot of survivors are already dealing with.”

He said it’s too early to know if the two-week increase is a blip in the data or if police should anticipate a continued rise in domestic-violence calls over the course of the outbreak.

“Safety is of paramount importance to the department and if you violate a domestic-violence no-contact order, we’ll arrest you and book you into jail,” Michaud said.

Bellevue police have also seen an increase in domestic-violence calls, even as overall 911 call volumes have dropped 50%, said Meeghan Black, a spokeswoman for the Bellevue Police Department (BPD). There is usually an average of 259 daily calls for service city-wide, but that number has dropped to 124 since stores were closed and people are staying home, reducing the number of shopliftings, thefts and motor-vehicle collisions police are called to respond to, she said.

But from March 1 to 23, BPD officers responded to 48 domestic-violence calls, which represents a 17% increase over the 41 calls received during the same period last year, Black said.

“We are definitely concerned,” she said. “Particularly for someone living in a situation they don’t feel safe, being confined to that space can mean trouble.”

The coronavirus outbreak has resulted in the [suspension of jury trials](#) and seen [courthouses across the state closed to the public](#). But domestic-violence victims in King County can now remotely petition for protection orders, which prosecutors say is key to ensuring access to justice.

King County prosecutors and victim advocates have been working with Superior Court Judge Janet Helson and [LegalAtoms.com](#), a local tech startup, to allow victims to file civil petitions for domestic-violence protection orders online, said Senior Deputy Prosecutor David Martin, who chairs his office’s domestic-violence unit. The new option, which is only available for domestic-violence protection orders, was rolled out Wednesday, even as victims have been told not to show up to court and instead [to call and email advocates for help filling out court forms and to appear for court hearings by phone](#).

“This past weekend was ugly,” Martin said of the March 21-22 weekend. “We had a lot of felony domestic-violence (suspects) that were booked and we’re seeing a rise on our (court) calendars.”

Protection orders, he said, “don’t make people safe but they do make a lot of people safer. They level the playing field in an inherently uneven power relationship between a victim and an abuser.”

When someone is charged with a domestic-violence-related crime, criminal no-contact orders are filed by prosecutors to protect victims from further contact with their alleged abusers. But individuals can also seek civil-protection orders even when criminal charges haven't been filed. People requiring other types of protection orders — including sexual assault, stalking, extreme risk, vulnerable adult and anti-harassment orders — are also being told not to come to court and to file electronic petitions and appear for hearings by phone.

On Friday, Superior Court Presiding Judge Jim Rogers issued his 15th emergency order since the outbreak began. Among the issues addressed, Rogers gave judges authority to extend the life of protection orders.

“All those orders are about emergent personal-safety issues,” said Helson, the superior court's chief unified family-law judge. “The complication has been how to create access (when the courts are closed) when a lot of these people already have a lot of barriers to access.”

Hearings for alleged domestic-violence abusers who are required to surrender weapons are also now being done by phone, Helson said.

While criminal defendants are notified of no-contact orders in court, those facing civil orders are typically served in person by police officers. In the age of social-distancing, Martin said his office is working with police to notify respondents they are the subjects of no-contact orders by phone and email, with electronic verification that email notifications have been opened and read. If service by police officers becomes unavailable, Rogers' emergency order says judges can also order that notifications be made by mail.

“These are critically important orders. We know they work and we want to preserve this option for victims,” said Martin, who shares Segall's fears that incidents of domestic violence will rise the longer the pandemic drags on. “If somebody is going to be removed from a residence or firearms need to be removed, it still has to be done in person.”

Wendi Lindquist, a spokeswoman for [LifeWire](#), a Bellevue-based nonprofit that serves domestic-violence survivors in north and east King County, is especially worried about low-income and marginalized people from minority, refugee and immigrant communities who are being disproportionately impacted by job losses due to the virus and who have relied on schools for child care and meals for their children.

Domestic violence is already the leading cause of homelessness for women and children and 99% of domestic abusers control finances to exert power over victims, Lindquist said, recalling one client whose husband threw a fishbowl at her for spending too much money on food. The coronavirus crisis is amplifying financial instability and adding additional stress for people already on the edge, she said.

The crisis is also impacting the organizations that provide housing, financial aid and other services to victims, Lindquist said. Lifewire, New Beginnings in Seattle and the [Domestic Abuse Women's Network \(DAWN\)](#), which serves South King County, all canceled spring fundraising events. LifeWire is launching a virtual fundraiser April 6 and all three organizations already accept online donations.

“Because all of us are affected, it’s not like the burden can be shifted from one agency to another,” Lindquist said of the anticipated funding shortfall amid the growing need. “This is one added stress nobody needed, yet people are still shining and working hard, both survivors and advocates.”