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January Is National Stalking Awareness Month
Yolo County DA's Office offers tips on stalking awareness

By Julia Hernandez Hill, M.S.W.

Imagine that you don't feel safe. Someone is following you, texting and emailing you, and you are afraid. In one year, 6.6 million Americans were victims of stalking, a serious crime that can happen to anyone and that communities need to be aware of.

In January 2004, the National Center for Victims of Crime launched the National Stalking Awareness Month (NSAM) to increase the public's understanding of the crime of stalking. NSAM began in response to a 2003 call when Debbie Riddle contacted the Stalking Resource Center seeking help. Peggy Klinke, Debbie's sister, had been brutally murdered two months earlier by a former boyfriend who had stalked her before killing her and then himself. Debbie wanted to translate her family's painful tragedy into a force for positive change. Her aim was to train law enforcement and provide education about how stalking is a real and dangerous crime.

Stalking is a pattern of behavior that is unpredictable, frightening and dangerous. It is not a crime of passion or too much love rather stalking is targeted violence. It is a deliberate set of tactics designed to control and intimidate the victim. Stalking is a crime in all fifty states yet many victims and criminal justice professionals underestimate its seriousness and impact. That is why stalking awareness is so important. Here are steps that may aid in identifying stalking behavior and/or help a stalking victim even if that person is you:

Ask the question "Is someone following, watching, or communicating with you in ways that seem obsessive or make you concerned for your safety?" This answer may be the first step to identify what is happening or to help victims see and acknowledge the stalking-like behavior.

Explain that stalking is a "red flag" for violence and psychological harm. Even when victims realize that they are being stalked, they often minimize their level of risk.

Victims of stalking should keep an ongoing journal to document the behaviors of the stalker. Helping professionals often advise victims to note dates, times, what happened and any witnesses that may be present to the incident. Victims should also document how the stalking has affected them and any changes they had to make in their daily lives.

It is very important that stalking victims engage in active safety planning and understand that self-protection is crucial. This may include changing privacy settings on or terminating social media sites, screening calls, increasing residential security, altering their daily routine, and possibly relocating.

Lastly, those being targeted need to tell their close friends and loved ones about the behavior and seek help from law enforcement or professionals in support agencies. Telling others they trust about the situation can provide emotional support and help them to not feel so alone. And the more people that know about the dangerous behavior, the more people who will be on the lookout for the stalker if he or she comes around the victim's residence or place of work.

For more information, please contact the Victim Services Program at Yolo County District Attorney's Office at 530.666.8187. For additional resources about National Stalking Awareness Month, please visit <http://stalkingawarenessmonth.org> and www.ovw.usdoj.gov.

-Julia Hernandez Hill has a Master's in Social Work and has been a Victim Advocate for the Yolo County District Attorney's Office for the past 13 years.

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