

HURLEY MEDICAL MAKES COMMUNITY VIOLENCE THEIR BUSINESS

Wanda* has three foster children and a very angry boyfriend. Her bruises attest to past arguments, but this isn't the first time she's found herself in an abusive relationship. Even so, this one was different. Upset about being laid off, he had been flying into rages at the least provocation, or with no provocation at all. The children were terrified, and Wanda had to admit, so was she. She was trying to provide a safe and stable home for the kids. They deserved as much, and keeping them with her depended on that. The night he threw the remote control at the television in a fit of rage, Wanda decided enough was enough. She finally called the police.

The police were able to defuse the situation, but if it weren't for Colleen Determan and Hurley Medical Center's Violence/Trauma Intervention Program (VIP), that could well have been just the first of many such calls. The Program is a partnership with Genesee County Mental Health Services and the City of Flint (Michigan) Police Department.

Hard hit by the loss of manufacturing jobs over the years, Flint has seen a steep decline in population—from about 160,000 in 1980 to 117,000 today—mirrored by a sharp increase in violent crime over the years. As the region's only Level I trauma center and the area's only safety net public hospital, Hurley Medical Center faced the crisis head-on.

Hurley established the VIP in 1987 to provide immediate psychosocial support to families threatened by violence at home. "The project is an excellent illustration of a collaborative response to a community-wide

issue," says Determan, the program's violence/trauma intervention specialist.

When police are called to the scene of domestic violence, an officer will ask whether the victim is willing to have a social worker come to the home. If the answer is yes, Determan or her backup will be there that very night. Someone is on-call in the VIP office, adjacent to the Hurley ER, Thursday through Sunday, from 5 pm to 3 am. "Those are the peak periods for violence," Determan explains.

A home visit at the time of the crisis is a cornerstone of the program. By going to where the trouble started, a social worker can make a better assessment of the situation and have greater success building rapport. "We found that once patients arrived in the ER, it was too late, denial had set in," Determan says, adding that police will be called an average of seven times before an individual commits to change.

The VIP offers short-term assistance at a critical time by linking families with appropriate services. It may be counseling, treatment for substance abuse, or such basic needs as food, clothing, and shelter. "We're the go-between—between the crisis incident and the resources that they need," Determan says. "Often times, they don't know where to turn," given the complexity of the problems.

VIP specialists work with the family as a whole—the victim, the perpetrator if appropriate, and importantly, with the children. "I call them the forgotten victims," Determan says of the children. "A lot of times we're

breaking the cycle of violence by working with kids that have witnessed these horrific incidents."

Over its 20-year life, the VIP has worked with an estimated 8,500 households, involving more than 25,000 individuals, according to Jim Buterakos, administrator for ambulatory services at Hurley Medical Center. Clearly, this is a community in need of healing. Equally clear is the scarcity of resources as the economy worsens. Major funding for the program from Genesee County Mental Health Services is about to end, but Buterakos insists that the program will continue.

"Hurley's mission is to meet the health care needs of our community and to maintain a public responsibility to those who may not have access to the care they need, including the mental, emotional, as well as physical components of health and well-being. Our VIP program has been able to fill that gap and help people understand there are other means to respond to stress and conflict besides being violent." ❣

**Fictitious name to protect patient privacy*

Hurley Medical's VIP Program received NAPH's "Patient Centered Care Honorable Mention" Safety Net Award in 2007.

CONTACTS FOR THIS ARTICLE

Colleen Determan, ACSW, Violence/Trauma Intervention Specialist, Hurley Medical Center, 810-625-3640

James Buterakos, Administrator for Ambulatory Services, Hurley Medical Center, 810-257-9319, JButera1@hurleymc.com