

Opening Dialogs To Deal With An Age Old Problem

For generations, domestic violence has been one of those things that has been swept under the rug and not talked about. It is not that people felt it was right, it was just that often they felt powerless to find a way to change it. A new program in North Dakota is looking for yet another way to change that attitude by starting the conversations and finding new ways to get everyone involved to make a positive change to the community and the lives of the people within it.

The North Dakota Council on Abused Women's Services and the Coalition Against Sexual Assault in North Dakota have been awarded a federal grant to start the "Engaging Men Project". Recognizing that most men are not violent towards women and that men's efforts for ending violence are critical to success, the "Engaging Men Program" has been implemented by the US Department of Justice in communities and states around the country. For the first time in history a federal grant program has its primary focus on men's prevention of sexual assault, domestic violence and stalking. NDCAWS is one of only 23 projects around the country to receive an award through the program. Their goal is to work with various communities in North Dakota's oil, coal and wind energy development areas to implement supportive and healthy relationships.

To kick off the one-year grant program, NDCAWS/CASAND scheduled town hall meetings called "ND's Oil Patch: Issues and Answers" in Stanley and Williston. The first was held on Sunday, Nov. 6 at the American Lutheran Church in Stanley. Troy Roness, Men's Initiative Coordinator, and Suzanne Kramer-Brenna, Rural Outreach Coordinator, were on hand to facilitate an open discussion with those attending to find out what the concerns are, and how they affect communities as they look to keep women feeling safe and protected. They have also created an advisory council that includes Stanley Mayor Mike Hynek, Bishop Mark Narum and Ward County Sheriff Steve Kukowski to help drive this project forward. They hope to get the energy industry, media, local businesses and faith communities to be part of the ongoing process.

The topics included concerns over current issues that affect safe and healthy relationships, including issues that may be exacerbating issues as they try to find ways to engage men and boys to make their communities a safe environment. Issues discussed included recent incidences of missing young women, gang activity and things that happen to make young women feel threatened. These issues also cause those around them to be concerned for their safety. With an ever increasing population, issues come up and the goal is to find places and events for people to go to and feel safe as they gather.

Another topic was what type of events lead to problems in the area and the need for answers. They want to talk about what needs to be fixed so that parents are not afraid to let their young kids go out alone at night. The feeling is that we like our smaller communities and we want them to be safe for everyone.

Attendees were asked to name things that are affected and what their concerns might be. Those include the safety of women and young children and changes to social lives. That includes the fact that children and young people in small communities tend to be very trusting. The majority of the new people coming to the area are great people, but there are some that fall through the cracks. Mountrail County Sheriff's Department and local law enforcement agencies are doing their best to stay on top of issues and keep communities safe.

They also asked if those attending felt there was an increase in prostitution or sex trafficking, especially with reports that are made of an increase in that type of activity in the northwest part of the state. Most believe it is going on but they don't know what to watch for.

Other concerns, while not related directly to domestic violence, include increased traffic and a health and safety concern as infrastructure is taxed to its limits. There are also concerns over housing needs and especially affordable housing. The boom has been good for some, but not everybody as they try to live in the new economy created by the energy boom.

They asked those in attendance to think about how all of the changes make them feel. Some of those concerns include a need for standards to be set. While change is inevitable, there needs to be a system of checks and balances.

Many feel disrespected and frustrated as they see the changes around them. Organizers encouraged them to know who their leadership is and how they can help the community as a whole deal with all of the changes. All of the changes happened so quickly that many people feel overwhelmed. They have compassion for the new people arriving in the area. They have come here to better their lives, however we weren't prepared for them when they got here. In effect, many times the temporary housing creates a community that lacks the necessary elements for a healthy, full community.

As they got through the conversations, they asked what people thought might be among the most important to address. It was felt that affordable, clean and livable housing for families would help. For many of these men, they have left their families behind as they search for work. The ability to bring their families here could help strengthen a sense of community and might also help with many of the employment shortages faced by the support services and businesses in a community.

The goal of Engaging Men in North Dakota is to create a community organization that will get communities prepared and find ideas of what can be done to create those organizations involving everyone to put policies in place that will keep workers safe and make the communities a safer place for young girls and women. By engaging the industry, they hope to find ways to create policy that will strengthen what they are already doing.

The evening wrapped up with possible steps to help affect change. They included more education for students, including the healthy relationships programs in schools. Another suggestion was more open communication in a community to take it upon ourselves to make these changes. We can become more powerful the more educated we are. They also talked about bringing people together again to start implementing ideas that could make the communities safer and better places.

One only has to look at Mountrail County to realize that something needs to be done. Domestic violence incidences have doubled in Mountrail County and those incidences are growing more violent. This is not something new, domestic violence has been going on for a very long time. The goal is to raise awareness, because truthfully it is not necessarily scary until it happens to you.

It is a long road ahead to affect change, but we can make progress step by step. This can just be the start of it as communities look to address health and safety and make a difference. If you would like to be part of the conversations, another meeting is scheduled for November 17 at First Lutheran Church in Williston at 7:00 p.m.