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Commentary: More work remains in the effort against domestic violence in SC

BY SARA BARBER
15 HRS AGO



Sara Barber is executive director of the S.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

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In almost every public appearance, South Carolina's leaders tout our beautiful beaches, our economic prosperity and our Southern hospitality. And while it's true that South Carolina has made great strides in terms of business growth, industry and tourism, we've made little progress in our ability to keep women, especially women of color and tribal women, safe.

For as long as the Washington, D.C.-based Violence Policy Center has issued its annual report on the rate of women murdered by men, South Carolina has ranked among the worst U.S. states, topping the list in 2015, 2013, 2003 and 2000.

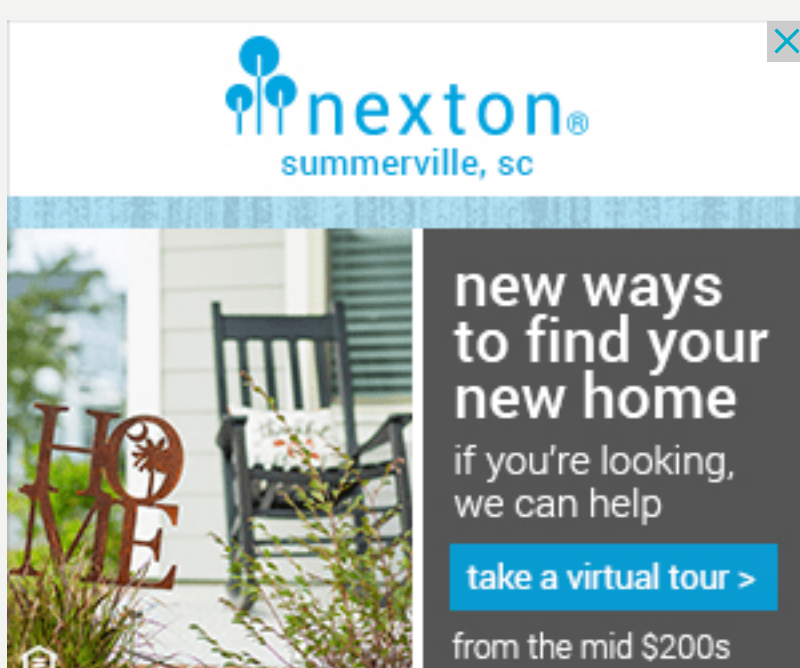
In the report released just days ago, South Carolina ranked 11th based on 2018 numbers. While on the surface this seems encouraging, this is not a reason to reduce our efforts. On the contrary, the state's sustained high ranking underscores an ongoing and significant problem. Furthermore, this ranking does not provide any insight into what is occurring now with regards to intimate partner violence.



The COVID-19 crisis has created a uniquely challenging situation for advocates and an exceptionally dangerous situation for victims. Increased economic hardship and necessary restrictions on travel have amplified the risk of harm for those who are in close and more frequent proximity to their abusers, meaning most victims have lost access to those precious few moments where they could find opportunities to seek help during work or school hours.

So, what can we do now?

First, we must accept and acknowledge that domestic violence is not simply a criminal justice problem. This is clear in the fact that during normal times, only about half of violent domestic crime victims call the police. We will never make significant advancements if we don't change our mindset and our approach to addressing all of its manifestations as an economic, public health, community and human rights problem.



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Second, we must widen our view when it comes to policy and programs. Myriad factors impact the underlying causes and cyclical nature of intimate partner violence including housing instability, systemic racism and inequity, food insecurity and other societal pressures — instances of which have been magnified throughout the pandemic. Economic insecurity puts women at greater risk for abuse, and domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness for women and children. Lack of access to affordable housing, comprehensive paid leave and affordable child care means a woman's ability to escape an abusive situation is greatly diminished. We must think bigger, and be bolder, in order to develop comprehensive, survivor-centered solutions and policies.

Third, we must better engage the community. In every situation where domestic violence occurs, the community is impacted. During the pandemic, numerous community support systems experienced loss of funding, loss of programming or simply loss of communication. Lower connectivity makes it easier to conceal the things we'd rather keep hidden. We must intentionally create opportunities for connection within our own communities and also ensure all victims have access to the services and resources they need including emergency shelter, support and civil legal assistance no matter their socioeconomic status, race, religion or gender.

What is occurring now behind closed doors in homes across the Palmetto State, perhaps even next door, is affecting all of us whether we are able to see it or not. Domestic violence is impacting our businesses, our children and our workforce, and we will experience the repercussions for months, years, even decades into the future.

As we look toward the upcoming election, we encourage and urge all South Carolinians to use the power of your voices and your votes to make it clear to our elected officials that we will no longer tolerate the continuation of South Carolina's terrible history and present desperate situation with regards to domestic violence. The need is urgent. We must act now to bring about robust, necessary investments in prevention, pathways to healing and support to create a safer state that truly reflects our outward facing image.

Sara Barber is executive director of the S.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

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