Senate Health and Human Services Committee Hearing

12.08.20

COVID-19: Evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the impact of the COVID-19 response on behavioral health, child abuse, family violence, long-term care residents, and delayed medical care.

Outline for Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) Testimony

- Brief introduction of TCFV and network of family violence programs in Texas
- Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence globally, nationally and in Texas
    - What we learned from Harvey and other disasters
        - DV increases during and following Harvey due to increased stress from job loss / financial strain, limited access to resources and disconnection from social support systems (How COVID 19 May Increase Domestic Violence and Child Abuse)
        - Risk factors associated with DV are exacerbated (Impact of COVID 19 in the Precipitation of IPV)
    - IPV rate increase in Texas
        - 80.9 percent of victims reported relationship difficulty increased and 40 percent said their safety decreased (COVID-19 and Family Violence: What's New in Texas-Based Research, UTMB Center for Violence Prevention)
        - Early analysis of Texas Crime reports reveal an 8.8 percent increase in calls to law enforcement for family violence in the first six months of the pandemic with a notable increase in the use of firearms, a known marker for lethality, in these incidents (TCFV analysis of TDPS Family Violence Summary Report)
    - Contextualizing domestic violence amidst a pandemic and stay home orders
        - Exponential augmentation of isolation including disconnection from opportunities for support and healing (A Pandemic within a Pandemic: Intimate Partner Violence during COVID 19; Loneliness and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Intimate Partner Violence Survivors
        - Economic / financial abuse - abusers were using the pandemic as a means to start or escalate sabotaging their partner's ability to work or study. (Cost of COVID 19: Economic Abuse Throughout the Pandemic)

- Survivors have limited agency/ decision making power to take precautions / minimize risk based on abusive partner's behaviors, choices and coercion

- Many stressors associated with COVID 19 exacerbate negative mental health consequences and substance use coercion and / or coping mechanisms already associated with IPV victimization (Women's mental health: acute impact of COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence)
- Texas survivors, at rates higher than survivors across the country, report money and resource challenges due to COVID 19 including trouble getting food, trouble paying bills, lack of transportation and challenges with access public benefits (Economic Impact of COVID 19 on Survivors Survey)
- COVID 19 has increased barriers to survivors' ability to reach out / seek support because they do not have a private and safe way to do so
- Children are present and exposed to domestic violence at even higher frequency than before

- COVID-19 changed the landscape of family violence services overnight as well as the needs of victims.

  - Shelters transformed their spaces overnight to reduce census and provide recommended physical distancing.
  - Vast majority of family violence program staff considered essential workers, however programs struggled to find the personal protective equipment (PPE).
  - The need to create contingency plans for quarantining when staff or clients test positive, or come in contact with COVID-19, have left programs understaffed, with frontline advocates experiencing high stress, anxiety, and exhaustion.
  - Programs have had to bolster access to virtual and telephone services. Many continue to struggle to provide needed technology to staff and ensure that survivors had adequate access to connect.
  - Virtual services provision requires intensive navigation of technology safety and data security concerns.