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Subject: Miami Herald Document

The Miami Herald

Miami Herald, The (FL)

November 5, 1995

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONFERENCE SET AT ST. THOMAS

Author: Herald Staff

Edition: FINAL

Section: NEIGHBORS NW

Page: 27

Estimated printed pages: 1

Article Text:

St. Thomas University will sponsor a conference for South Florida religious leaders titled "Facing the Epidemic of Domestic Violence" from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Wednesday at the university, 16400 NW 32nd Ave.

Among the speakers will be Dade County State Attorney Kathy Fernandez-Rundle; Robin Hassler, executive director of the Governor's Task Force on Domestic Violence; Angela Diaz-Vidallet of the Dade Family and Victim Services; Robert Schroeder of Advocates for Victims-SafeSpace Shelters; and Opa-loka Detective Therese Honar.

The conference is sponsored by the Dade County Alliance Against Domestic Violence, the South Florida Catholic Leadership Committee on Domestic Violence and Advocates for Victims-SafeSpace Shelters. Cost is \$10, which includes breakfast and materials.

To register, call Ray Ruff at 628-6717 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays.

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Record Number: 9509120289

About 60 cases a year involve gay and lesbian couples. But that's just the tip of the iceberg, Diaz-Vidallet said. Her office only sees the indigent cases. The rest get referred to other community agencies.

Diaz-Vidallet, a lesbian, said she helped start the task force because the gay community has special needs when it comes to fighting domestic violence.

"There are a lot of things we have in common with the heterosexual population," Diaz-Vidallet said. "But a lot of issues I see things the general population doesn't have to go through. It's very hard for people who are straight to connect."

Among these issues are homophobia by law enforcers and child-custody disputes.

Gay people in Florida have no custody rights where their partners' children are concerned, and that often scares adoptive mothers and fathers from leaving violent relationships or getting help.

"A lot of gay men and women have children together," Diaz-Vidallet said. "That complicates things, especially if the victim is not the natural mother or father. Because he or she has no rights in our system."

One of the chief goals of the new task force, which is funded with a \$53,000 federal grant, is to sensitize police, prosecutors and public defenders in dealing with gay and lesbian clients and issues.

In most domestic violence cases, heterosexual and homosexual, the couples are ordered into counseling, Diaz-Vidallet said.

But when police investigate domestic-violence complaints in gay households, the officers often don't recognize that the couples are in romantic relationships. The cases are then stamped "roommate disputes," preventing the forced counseling.

Diaz-Vidallet said the first thing any domestic-violence victim should do is seek help.

"You need to sort out your thoughts. You need to make a plan and see what your alternatives and resources are," she said. "Just leave? When you are talking about human beings and feelings involved, it's just not that simple. Make your decision and work toward it. If your decision is to leave, have a safety plan. Put money away. Have two sets of keys to your car."

"If you decide to stay, know your alternatives. You can get an injunction for protection. Through that injunction the abuser can be mandated to go into a counseling program," she said. "It's a start."

Outlooks is a column about gay and lesbian life in South Florida. To contact any of the writers call 305-376-3770, or fax them at 305-376-5287. Notices can be mailed to: Outlooks c/o Steve Rothman, 1 Herald Plaza, Fifth Floor, Miami, FL 33132. The e-mail address is

outlooks@herald.com

You can also find the column on-line at www.herald.com/outlooks

TO FIND HELP

If you are in a violent relationship and need help, call Miami-Dade Family and Victim Services at 305-

331-7750. Ask for Ivette Suarez at ext. 231, or Angela Diaz-Vidallet at ext. 229. If you don't live in Miami-Dade County, Suarez and Diaz-Vidallet will refer you to the appropriate agency.

TO FIND HELP

Memo:

OUTLOOKS

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Record Number: 9811190227