

MAKING A BREAK? HELP IS AVAILABLE FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS

By Kelly Forst, Esq.

As we turn the calendar to 2024, some readers will find themselves or other family members separating from their spouse or live-in partner. Couples split for many reasons. Some simply grow apart, and others have conflicts that just can't be resolved. Domestic violence, ("DV"), also called Intimate Partner Violence ("IPV") is often the last straw, causing the end to an already unhealthy relationship.

Most acts of DV/IPV don't come from out of the blue. For some victims, the abuse continues for years before turning physically violent. Lack of financial resources, fear of criminal consequences to the offender, and the so-called cycle of abuse – an event, an apology, a quiet period, and then build up to another event – keep victims stuck. A key warning sign of intensifying DV/IPV is behavior designed to isolate the victim: controlling who her friends are and when she can see them; extreme or unwarranted jealousy; moving to a new community; keeping the victim financially dependent or uninformed.

No matter what the circumstances, victims never "deserve" their treatment. Because DV/IPV is, at its core, about coercive control, victims are at the highest risk of serious violence when they are about to make a break from their abusers.

DV/IPV takes on many forms, including the use of threats and intimidation, and emotional, financial, and sexual abuse, among others. According to the CDC, there is no socio-economic, cultural, racial or religious risk factor. Some risk factors include substance use, financial stress, depression, isolation, and a history of physical or emotional abuse in childhood. Community factors that create risk of IPV include lack of familiarity with neighbors, low community involvement among residents, and easy access to drugs and alcohol.

Protective factors – what keeps victims safer - include strong social relationships and community resources. Fortunately, help is available. Florida has a *quasi*-criminal process, whereby the victim has a right to seek an Injunction for Protection – a type of Court Order - directing that the perpetrator stays away from the victim, her home, school or workplace. By completing a petition with trained staff members at the Courthouse, a victim can receive a temporary Order. The perpetrator will be served with the Petition and any temporary Order made by the Court and will have an opportunity to be heard. Temporary custody of children and child support may be awarded in the same proceeding.

A victim who already has an Order in another state may register that Order with the Florida Courts and the Sheriff's office, so that it may be enforced locally.

Florida also maintains numerous shelters and other resources for victims. Florida's Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline phone number is 1-800-500-1119. There, victims can be connected to legal assistance, emergency housing, counseling services and other support. In Osceola County, *Help Now* provides local support to victims of DV/IPV. For information or help making an escape plan, call them at (407) 847-8562 / (407) 846-2472 TTY.

Separation and divorce is one of the most difficult transitions a family can make, but there is hope for a safer, healthier tomorrow. At Forst Law Firm, we wish all the residents of Celebration a safe, happy and healthy new year.