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On the Record: Coalition campaign spotlights financial side of domestic abuse



Francine Garland Stark, executive director of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, says she feels privileged to play a role in supporting survivors and their children. — PHOTO / JIM NEUGER

BY **RENEE CORDES**
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The Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence recently teamed up with Words From The Woods, a Portland-based advertising agency, on a public awareness and donor campaign built around the financial aspects of domestic abuse. To find out more about the coalition and the campaign, Mainebiz checked in with Francine Garland Stark, executive director of the Augusta-based nonprofit group who leads a staff of 14.

Mainebiz: For readers not familiar with your organization, what does the coalition do?

Francine Garland Stark: MCEdV was founded in 1977 by domestic violence advocates and survivors who sought to have a unified voice in state and federal policy discussions and to ensure statewide access to services for people affected by abuse and violence. Since then, MCEdV has worked to end intimate partner and family abuse in all its forms, including coercive control, physical violence, sexual abuse, stalking, financial exploitation and sex trafficking.

MB: What are some misconceptions about domestic violence you would like to change?

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FGS: Abuse is a pattern of controlling behavior — not isolated incidents of assault. Threats, stalking, sabotaging finances, demeaning treatment and isolation are just some of the ongoing tactics that trap people into abusive relationships. “Just leave” is common advice, but it is a cruel dismissal of the threat that the abusive person will continue to be. Abusive people are most dangerous when they believe their partner is leaving them. Supporting survivors means fully understanding what they need to be independent and thriving.

MB: Your public awareness and donor campaign highlights domestic abuse as a financial issue as well as a personal and social one. What do you mean by that?

FGS: Abusers often control finances and accumulate debt — sometimes without their partner’s knowledge. They frequently sabotage transportation, child care or education, making it difficult to work, leaving their partner without money and unable to access credit. Separating is expensive, because it involves rebuilding the basics of life essentially from scratch.

MB: What do you hope the campaign will accomplish?

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FGS: Getting free from abuse is hard, but there is hope and help available 24/7 through Maine's regional Domestic Violence Resource Centers, at 866-834-HELP. The Fund Safety Campaign will ensure that the Liberation Fund, which provides flexible financial support for survivors that is tied to wraparound advocacy support, remains available to eliminate barriers to safety, like car repairs, security deposits, old debt and legal fees.

MB: Where does the coalition's funding come from, and what are some of the biggest challenges involved in sustaining that funding?

FGS: MCEDV is funded primarily by state and federal grants, supplemented by private foundation and donor support. Currently, federal grantmaking agencies are going through profound upheaval. Competition for funds is more intense than ever, with all nonprofits addressing critical human needs being impacted by federal funding reductions in the face of ongoing and escalating need throughout our communities.

MB: What changes have you seen in how Maine understands and responds to domestic violence?

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FGS: Mainers are far more likely today than 40 years ago to recognize that someone they care about is experiencing abuse and far more likely to be helpful. People who are abusive to their partners are far more likely to be arrested for domestic violence crimes. There is less shame in coming forward as a survivor of abuse, though there's much work still to be done to ensure meaningful accountability and support behavior change in those who abuse.

MB: What's your immediate ask of state lawmakers in their next session?

FGS: Fund domestic violence services, for sure. Before passing any additional laws, fund the

systems responsible for implementing the laws already on the books and the services people need to live with dignity and safety in Maine. Fund safety.

MB: What keeps you going in this work?

FGS: I have felt privileged every day to have the opportunity to apply my skills to this work and be part of such an incredible community of people addressing the needs of survivors and their children, helping ensure that there are well-trained and empathetic advocates all over the state ready to support survivors and their children on their journeys to safety and liberation.

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