

Conference at UM aims to empower all to prevent child sexual abuse

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Everybody wants to prevent child sex abuse. Not everybody knows how.

Numbers back up those sweeping statements, participants in a daylong conference on child abuse prevention were told Friday. In a survey of about 600 people, some 91 percent asked about a hypothetical child abuse incident said they'd report it, but only 72 percent of people who said they knew of actual situations reported them. And 22 percent in the latter group did nothing at all, said Yvonne Cournoyer, keynote speaker at the conference on the University of Montana campus.

"I don't think any of us think of ourselves as the person who would do nothing in that situation," Cournoyer told the audience of social workers, attorneys, law enforcement personnel and others in the University Center Theater. "But we don't know what to do."

Friday's Stop It Now! workshop - which took its name from a national group that works with adults to prevent child abuse - aimed to change that.

It was hosted jointly by the Child Protection Unit of the Montana Attorney General's Office, the Missoula County Attorney's Office, the Missoula County Multi-Disciplinary Team and the Flathead County Children's Advocacy Center.

For too long, too many prevention programs put the burden on children, Cournoyer said, the national program director for Stop It Now!

They learned that the scary guy in the raincoat prowling the outskirts of the playground wasn't the only danger; that "bad touch" was more likely to come from people they knew. And kids also were taught to tell a trusted adult.

But no one told that trusted adult how to respond, especially when the incident might have fallen short of actual abuse, she said.

The recent sex abuse allegations against former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky provided a sadly perfect example, she said, with a witness in effect telling famed coach Joe Paterno - who died Sunday - "I'm not even sure I'm seeing what I'm seeing."

The topic makes people so uncomfortable that they turn away rather than deal with it, she said. But with training, she said, people can learn "how to have uncomfortable conversations about boundary violations."

Likewise, she said, there's little help for people who might have inappropriate urges toward children but haven't acted on those urges - yet.

"We have some poignant stories of people almost disclosing to their faith leaders ... but the faith leaders are so uncomfortable" that the conversations went nowhere, she said.

Stop It Now! started a billboard campaign "for people worried about their own behaviors or for people who know and love people who need help," she said. That campaign refers people to a help line or a website. (Calls to the help line increased 130 percent after the child sex abuse allegations against Sandusky were revealed, she said.)

As to questions about whether treatment can actually change such a person, she said the situation is much like alcoholism. "We would never say that someone is cured, (but that) someone is managing their behavior."

Cournoyer repeatedly stressed prevention. "We have to believe there are things we can see and do before a child is harmed," she said.

Participants in the workshop spent much of Friday brainstorming ways to increase awareness and prevention.

Brett Kelso, director of the Children's Advocacy Center of Flathead County, said his group suggested getting local businesses to sponsor Stop It Now! billboards. Another suggestion involved training bystanders, in much the same way bystanders at bars are trained to alert people that a person has had too much to drink.

Deputy Missoula County Attorney Matt Lowy spoke of tools for "mandatory reporters" - those people who come in contact with children, such as physicians or teachers, who are required to report child abuse that they know of or reasonably suspect.

"As long as it's done in good faith, you are insulated from liability," he said. "And, it protects children."

Those people could carry cards in their wallets identifying them as mandatory reporters, and listing the requirements for such reporting - and maybe, too, the penalties for failing to report.

The most important thing, Cournoyer said, is to change the culture around the reluctance to report.

"I don't care if a hundred thousand million people are aware of child sexual abuse," she said, "nothing is going to change unless we do things differently."

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