

Support is Available for Wildfire Survivors Facing Domestic Violence

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LAHAINA, Hawaii – Calls to a Maui County domestic violence hotline have more than doubled as stress levels rise and social and financial pressures mount after the August wildfires, but behavioral health experts and counselors say help is available.

Behavioral experts say the upsurge in calls reflects a less obvious consequence of the fires: People are at higher risk of abuse after a disaster.

Violent incidents usually involve people in close relationships. Some callers say their abusers have changed for the worse, in ways they have never seen before. Their partners are angry and may be drinking a lot or lashing out because they are devastated about losing everything.

These descriptions come from callers to Women Helping Women, a service group for those affected by domestic violence that runs Maui County’s only local 24-hour emergency hotline. Sanoë Kaaihue, a Lahaina native, is executive director of the group.

Women Helping Women provides shelter and, through domestic violence counselors, helps clients obtain protection orders and get out of unsafe relationships and into secure housing. The group also runs a store where clients can “shop” for free donated household items and clothes.

Calls to the hotline have risen from 250 a month to 550 since the Aug. 8 wildfires.

The callers’ experiences are all too familiar. Some are grieving lost loved ones and friends. Homes and jobs have disappeared. Possessions have vanished. Families feel unsettled, moving from place to place.

“Eventually something has to give. Unfortunately, it can come in the form of severe abuse,” Kaaihue said. Hotline callers say they’ve been threatened with



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violence or have been assaulted and are seeking a safe haven, she said.

Maui's acute housing shortage worsens the problem to a point where some of those assaulted return to live with their abusers because they have nowhere else to go, said Kaaihue.

The Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response deployed a behavioral health team to Hawai'i to provide support services to people impacted by the wildfires.

The surge in domestic violence on Maui is consistent with the research findings about the connection between stress and violence, said Capt. Jonathan White, a behavioral health specialist and director of ASPR's Office of Community Mitigation and Recovery. "Domestic violence is a common and significant problem in all communities. Disasters ratchet up the risk," White said.

White's team has had more than 12,000 behavioral health encounters since the wildfires. These encounters include people who have lost a loved one, their homes, employment, are victims of domestic abuse, or are first responders helping the community recover.

Many factors contribute to the dangerous stress levels that can lead to violence, said White, a top expert in community recovery from public health emergencies. Men may feel disempowered when they lose their jobs and homes and this can affect their actions at home, he said. In these situations, women may feel isolated and less able to protect themselves. Disasters put families in close quarters for long periods and the continuous close proximity makes de-escalating conflict less likely.

"There is no substitute for talking to a domestic violence counselor," White said.

Domestic violence case managers can help, offering support through Women Helping Women and other resources. Case managers are skilled at helping survivors of domestic violence develop a safety plan and rebuild their lives. They connect clients to resources and show them how to get out of abusive relationships.

Help for those Affected by Domestic Violence



Below are Hawai'i and national programs that assist and advocate for people affected by domestic violence. Whether in a crisis or seeking information, individuals can contact the following resources. If you are in immediate physical danger, call 911.

- **Women Helping Women:** Maui residents seeking support for intimate-partner violence issues and concerns can find shelter, and help with protection orders and preventing child abuse.
 - If you are in a crisis and need help now, call the confidential 24-hour hotline at **808-579-9581**
 - Otherwise, call the main office: **808-242-6600**
 - Email info@whwmaui.net
- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline:**
 - Visit [Domestic Violence Support | National Domestic Violence Hotline \(thehotline.org\)](https://www.thehotline.org)
 - Call **800-799-7233**
 - Text **START** to **88788**
- **Parents and Children Together:** Offers programs and provides resources and support to help residents of Hawai'i affected by domestic violence and abuse.
 - Visit [PactHawaii.org](https://www.PactHawaii.org)
 - On Maui, call **808-243-7001**
 - For shelter and a 24-hour crisis line, call **808-526-2200**
- **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** website on violence prevention: [CDC.gov/violenceprevention](https://www.CDC.gov/violenceprevention)
- **Domestic Violence Action Center (O'ahu):** O'ahu residents seeking referrals and help with protection orders may:
 - Call **808-531-3771** or **800-690-6200**. Text **605-956-5680**
 - Visit [DomesticViolenceCenter.org](https://www.DomesticViolenceCenter.org)
- **Crisis Counseling** (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services): Confidential counseling is available to all wildfire survivors who experience emotional and mental health problems.
 - Call **Hawaii Cares** at **800-753-6879** or **808-832-3100**
 - Text **Hawaii Cares** to **988**

For the latest information on the Maui wildfire recovery efforts, visit [mauicounty.gov](https://www.mauicounty.gov), [mauirecovers.org](https://www.mauirecovers.org) and [fema.gov/disaster/4724](https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4724). Follow FEMA on social media: [@FEMARegion9](https://twitter.com/FEMARegion9) and [facebook.com/fema](https://www.facebook.com/fema).



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