

Dáil Éireann - Volume 632 - 28 February, 2007
Private Members' Business. - Domestic Violence:
Motion (Resumed).

Mr. J. Breen: The rate of domestic violence is clear in these alarming statistics: one in every five women and one in every 15 men, experience domestic violence. Yet the offices of State remain mostly ineffective in combatting the issue. The fear factor and shame factor felt by victims of domestic violence, the lack of awareness regarding help available, the under funding of aid agencies, the lack of specialist training for gardaí and the need for continued training and information seminars for members of the Judiciary are all symptoms of this national disease.

In County Clare, which has a population of more than 110,000, the District Court has one specific day per month to deal with family law cases which include hearings for protection orders, safety orders and barring orders. We are fortunate that, through the goodwill of the District Court judge, cases are heard before normal court business on other court days. The need to allocate extra days for the full hearing of family law cases is urgent, as is the need to appoint specific judges to hear such cases.

Equally important is the proper funding of agencies for the victims of domestic violence and an increase in the number of refuge homes available. In 2006 Clare Haven House gave refuge to 118 women and 96 children. It had 399 drop-in support visits and 150 visits to outreach clinics in Shannon, Kilrush, Scariff and Ennis. Clare Haven House received 725 telephone calls seeking help yet the centre is hugely reliant on the goodwill of part-time staff to work nights and weekends. While the funding received from the Health Service Executive and Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, is welcome, it must be increased to provide ongoing training of staff and to improve facilities.

When victims of domestic violence work up sufficient courage to seek help from the Garda Síochána they need proper information and support. Too often, they are simply referred to District Court offices. Specialist training of gardaí is necessary so that victims receive all the help they require.

Too many gardaí are not aware of the difference between protection, safety and barring orders and the criteria required to secure them. While applications for protection orders, which act as an interim order pending the hearing of an application for a further order, have a high rate of success, barring and safety orders are much more difficult to acquire. Between 2000 and 2005, 88% of protection order applications were granted, whereas only 44% of barring order and 41% of safety order applications were successful. Often the refusal was based on the applicant not meeting the criteria required.

To bar a person from his or her own home is an extremely serious matter but to refuse an application when a couple is not married or has not lived together for a sufficient period, rather than hearing the reasons the order has been sought in the first instance, is shameful. The law needs to be changed immediately to reflect trends in modern society.