

Law would order domestic violence training for stylists

State law would be first in the nation for licensed salon employees



Phil Kadner

Hair salon employees across Illinois would become a new front line in identifying victims of domestic violence and educating them about their options under legislation proposed by state Rep. Fran Hurley, D-Chicago, and backed by Chicago Ald. Matt O'Shea.

Aldermen on the City Council's Public Safety Committee voiced strong support Monday for a law that would be the first in the nation to mandate domestic violence and sexual assault training for professional salon employees, according to those behind the effort.

It would require one hour of training for nail technicians, cosmetologists and hairdressers who must renew their licenses every two years. The training would be a one-time event and would become part of the program required for renewing a license, not an additional component, according to those backing the bill.

The law — an amendment to the Barber, Cosmetology, Hair Braiding and Nail Technology Act of 1985 — is sponsored by Hurley, whose political base is in the 19th Ward, but whose House district extends through the southwest suburbs to Orland Park.

The City Council resolution supporting the bill is co-sponsored by O'Shea, who sits on the Public Safety Committee, which passed the resolution after hearing supportive testimony Monday from witnesses, including Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez.

Kristie Paskvan, founder of Chicago Says No More, a coalition of leaders in the private and philanthropic sectors created to generate public awareness about domestic violence, testified that victims on average only seek help after 35 incidents of abuse. She said of the roughly 900,000 college students in Illinois, about 127,000 have been sexually assaulted, but only 1 in 20 will ever report that assault.

In response to those statistics, Chicago Says No More organized this spring. In June, persuaded O'Shea and Ald. Margaret Laurino, 39th, to sponsor a City Council resolution supporting the training for professional salon employees.

Paskvan and Dorri McWhorter, chief executive officer of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, who also testified at Monday's committee hearing, said victims of domestic violence are more likely to confide in salon employees than a law enforcement or medical professional. Many witnesses also said perpetrators of domestic violence exert so much control over their victims that the only time victims may be left on their own is to get their hair cut or their nails done.

Under questioning from aldermen, Paskvan admitted that the training program for salon professionals is still being worked on, and details of what it would entail seemed sketchy at best.

One thing is clear, under the state law as drafted, salon employees could not be held civilly or criminally liable "for acting in good faith or failing to act on information obtained during the course of employment concerning potential domestic violence or sexual assault."

Ald. Willie B. Cochran, 20th, pointed out through his questioning of numerous witnesses that identifying victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse is only a small part of a much more complicated problem. Cochran noted that victims are reluctant to report their abusers for many reasons, including the potential loss of financial support, the potential for further attacks if abuse is reported and the disruption of their family lives.

Cochran repeatedly asked pointed questions about improving the support network for victims of domestic violence without getting much in the way of a response from the witnesses.

Paskvan responded that Chicago is about to open its first new domestic violence shelter in 10 years in the Chicago Lawn community on the Southwest Side, which illustrates only a small part of the problem. The state's bad financial situation has placed continued funding for domestic violence shelters and programs in jeopardy, and the city's finances are not much better than those of the state.

Paskvan said her organization is attempting to raise money for the domestic violence education program for salon professionals to make sure it can be sustained if the new law is passed.

But while other aldermen were busy praising the legislation's intent and the need to help victims, Cochran returned again and again to the issue of creating support programs for the victims and never did get much in the way of a direct response.

I've been writing about this issue for more than 25 years and have come to understand it better than most and to appreciate its complexity. Women in these situations often still love the men who are abusing them, or at least think they do.

The abusers themselves may be complicated characters. Some may be people who under normal circumstances wouldn't be thinking of hitting a loved one, but due to drug abuse, alcoholism or unemployment become emotionally and mentally unstable.

It's easy to say that someone who is the victim of abuse ought to move out but where to? Families aren't always willing to take them in. Giving up the place you call home is never easy. Children, especially if they're teenagers, may not want to leave. And how do you provide for them in the long term if the man is the primary wage earner?

Alvarez and other witnesses noted that domestic violence not only has an impact on the people living in the home where the abuse is taking place, but often has an impact on the streets, in schools and workplaces.

There's little doubt that people abused as children often become abusers themselves later in life. Children who are sexually molested are more likely to become predators as adults.

And all of that, along with the statistics cited earlier in this column about the vast number of victims, ought to be enough to explain why the problem ought to be a public priority. Enlisting the aid of salon employees seems like a logical place to have an impact, but as many of the witnesses would say, this is only a beginning.

Whatever training is involved, I would hope salon employees would be told about the importance of confidentiality. Yes, salons are places where women often exchange intimate secrets. They can also be places where gossip is thoughtlessly spread without a clear understanding of the harm it can do.



Several of the witnesses at City Hall on Monday testified that they had either been victims of, or witnesses to, domestic violence.

McWhorter, whose YWCA is the largest provider of domestic violence prevention programs in Chicago, testified that she had been in an abusive relationship with a man for many years. She said she told no one, including her salon professional, who had asked her at one point what was wrong.

George Gonzalez, owner of George the Salon, on Chicago's Gold Coast, testified in support of the legislation, noting that his mother was a victim of domestic violence and that he supports causes and organizations to help women in such situations. He said his employees have been sensitized to the issue, and they, as well as he, would embrace the new state law.

Any effort to improve public education about domestic violence ought to be enthusiastically embraced, and a state initiative to provide more points of contact for victims is a sound start, especially if those salon professionals are properly trained to direct victims to appropriate resources.

O'Shea said it would be good for Illinois to become the first in the nation for something it could be proud of, given all the negative publicity it has generated due to its recent political and financial problems.

But Cochran's concerns about providing adequate support for victims of domestic violence should not be ignored. Good intentions are wonderful. But follow-through is essential and often lacking, even when government officials are well-intentioned.

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