

# Service providers are crafting adaptations to combat the rise in domestic violence during the pandemic

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Pandemic restrictions such as quarantine and lockdowns isolate vulnerable people and limit their chances of safely leaving an abusive situation. Credit: Wictor Cardoso from Pexels

A certain item purchased at the grocery store, a hand signal made during

a video call, a numeric code pressed when dialing an emergency service like 911, or a specific word used at the pharmacy. All seem innocuous enough, but all are innovative ways that people experiencing domestic abuse can alert clerks and others that they need help.

The measures were developed and implemented in Canada and around the world when it became clear that the restrictions put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 were actually helping to fuel a rise in domestic violence, something the United Nations has called a "shadow pandemic." Quarantines and lockdowns meant that people living in abusive relationships could be forced to remain in their homes and limit their contact with friends and family.

Dr. Lori Weeks, a gerontologist with Dalhousie's School of Nursing, decided to examine the issue after hearing stories about both the rise in violence and how service providers were adapting so they could still reach people in abusive environments during the pandemic. Studies have shown that such restrictions isolate vulnerable people and limit their chances of safely leaving an abusive situation. Because of that, groups that provide help for victims of abuse have had to come up with different and more discreet ways to reach out and offer assistance.

"By nature, this is really what the dynamics are in abusive relationships where the abuser is isolating their partner, they don't have much contact with other people and they just want to have control over everything that goes on," she said.

"So, we thought it would be really useful to synthesize what we know about how family violence or domestic violence services can be provided within the context of COVID."

## **Gaining a global perspective**

On June 23, Dr. Weeks and her team used a database to scan French and English media reports on initiatives developed to support women experiencing domestic abuse from the start of the pandemic in March until that date. They did it this way in a bid to expedite the research, since such studies can take up to a year to gather findings.

Using particular language and with the help of librarians, the team developed a search strategy that put together a combination of the words to cast a wide net and capture as many results as possible with terms such as intimate partner violence and woman abuse.

The search yielded almost 2,500 reports that were whittled down to about 50 unique stories that described the new ways people could get help. They included initiatives in Canada, the United States, Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom involving technology-mediated services, partnerships with essential services like grocery stores, the provision of housing, and supportive legal resources.

On the technology front, several [social media sites](#), Zoom and apps developed helplines and online resources, such as an interactive map in Ireland that identifies places to get help that are close to home ([www.StillHere.ie](http://www.StillHere.ie)).

Dr. Weeks said some of the more innovative approaches were developed to help people who couldn't easily speak because an abuser may overhear the conversation. If calling 911, for example, someone can press 55 to let police know that it is a [domestic violence](#) emergency.

The Canadian Women's Foundation launched a hand signal—much like a clenched fist—that can be used on video calls to indicate there is a need for help. In the U.K., some stores include contact information for [domestic abuse](#) supports on receipts. At other essential services, women can use code words or buy specific items to let staff know they needed

help.

"We were really impressed with the creative ways that were developed really quickly to meet the needs of people in this COVID-19 context," she said. "So, these are ways to seek help even if you're isolated, you can't go out or if other people are monitoring your conversations."

## **Adapting to different circumstances**

Many of the new approaches, described in a report released in September, were designed for people who may not have access to technology. But Dr. Weeks also noticed that some groups were providing free cellphones and Wi-Fi. One initiative in the U.K. involved buying pay-as-go handsets with credit on them and hiding them in food packages.

"The flip side of that is if a person doesn't have access to these kinds of technologies, they're even more vulnerable. So, one of the more interesting interventions that we identified was how do we get tech to women and there were some interesting things developed there," says Dr. Weeks.

The team's goal is to share the information with people suffering abuse and anyone who has the ability to provide services.

"We really want to give people an idea of what is possible and what's being done in other places, and hopefully that can be adapted and modified for their particular context."

Provided by Dalhousie University

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