

**Testimony for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies  
Submitted by: Katie Ray-Jones, CEO, The National Domestic Violence Hotline  
May 26, 2022**

Good morning, Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole and distinguished members of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee. My name is Katie Ray-Jones, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) headquartered in Austin, TX. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the importance of continued federal investment in The Hotline and domestic violence services across the country. The Hotline is authorized as part of the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) and administered by the Family Violence Prevention and Services Program, a program of the Family and Youth Services Bureau under the Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services. The Hotline, established in 1996, is the only 24/7 national hotline that directly serves victims of domestic violence and dating abuse, as well as their friends and family via phone, chat, and text. We are experiencing the highest demand for our services in our 25-year history, and to help meet this overwhelming need, I am here to respectfully request that the Subcommittee increase its investment in The Hotline for FY 2023 to \$27 million. This increase is key to our ability to expand capacity through staff and technology quickly to serve as many survivors as possible.

The Hotline's work rests on three pillars – crisis intervention, prevention, and systems change. On December 30, 2021, we answered our 6 millionth contact since our inception – a truly bittersweet milestone and a reminder of just how pervasive domestic violence is in the United States. The time it takes to answer one million contacts continues to get shorter as demand for our services increases, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic persists with increased risks for survivors. It took nearly 7.5 years to answer our first million contacts, and just over two and a half years to answer the latest.

The Hotline's services are free, anonymous, and confidential, and we are often the first source of validation and support for those experiencing domestic violence or seeking to support someone who is impacted. We have the most comprehensive provider database in the country, with more than 5,000 providers and resources in the United States, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Guam. Our advocates go through an intensive trauma informed training process using our crisis intervention model conducted by our experienced training staff. A recent caller seeking information on how to support their daughter shared, "Thank you! I will read that and share the information with my daughter. This has been the most helpful support we have gotten in several months of dealing with this, so I want to thank you."

In calendar year 2021, The Hotline answered 408,370 calls, chats and texts (contacts)—the most answered in a single year in our history. Seventy-five percent (75%) of those we served identified as victims/survivors, 13% identified as friends, family members or other helpers, and 12% identified as "other," such as those working with survivors or even those causing harm. Of the abuse types reported, 96% of the contacts reported emotional abuse, 61% reported physical abuse, 26% reported economic/financial abuse, 15% reported digital abuse, and 11% reported sexual abuse.

We believed once life returned to any kind of normalcy from the devastating impact of COVID-19, there would be more survivors needing support who had not felt safe to reach out during the height of the pandemic. Sadly, our instincts were accurate. The Hotline's contact volume was up from October, 2021-

January, 2022 ranging from 6%-40% and in February 2022, The Hotline experienced the highest monthly contact volume in our history (74,000 incoming contacts in a 28-day period). A contributing factor in this increased demand, is that in February, in an effort to use its technology to help survivors connect with our services, Google launched a crisis search engine optimization tool to get critical, vetted information to searchers quickly. This means when a user inputs certain search terms related to domestic violence, The Hotline's information and direct links to our services pop up. The launch of Google's optimization technology has nearly doubled our contact volume— a powerful and somber illustration of how many people are impacted by relationship abuse and need access to 24/7 support.

Subsequent months have continued at the same increased volume. Average daily calls, chats and texts coming into The Hotline and love is respect (our youth-focused healthy relationship and dating abuse prevention program) are more than 2,600 incoming calls, chats and texts per day. Our typical pre-pandemic daily contact was 1,200 contacts per day on average. The Hotline is expanding our capacity through hiring and new technology to meet this increased demand as best we can, but more resources are needed. In response, our fundraising team launched an emergency \$2 million campaign to respond to the increased number of contacts and expand The Hotline's capacity by building technology solutions, such as triaging our contact queue, and accelerated hiring. To date \$750,000 has been raised thanks to the strong support of corporations, foundations, and individuals helping to ensure we meet the needs of as many survivors as possible. But we also desperately need to add a record number of new advocates on the lines and implement further technology advancements to manage this kind of volume.

Domestic violence (DV) encompasses intimate partner violence (IPV), dating abuse and relationship abuse. Domestic violence is often misinterpreted as a private issue. It is, in fact, a public health crisis that affects the safety of families, businesses, and communities across the country. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking are widespread. Domestic violence affects more than 12 million people each year. <sup>i</sup> According to the CDC, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will experience physical violence by their intimate partner at some point during their lifetimes. <sup>ii</sup>

It takes a comprehensive multi-layered national, regional and local approach to fully support survivors and further their survival, safety and recovery. This approach includes national 24/7 resources dedicated to serving those affected by DV/IPV, such as The Hotline, as well as state, regional and local providers and emergency shelter systems. In 2021, The Hotline provided 208,765 referrals to shelter and domestic violence service providers and 192,898 referrals to additional resources across the nation. The top resources and referral types include legal resources, economic resources, housing information, mental health and counseling services, health care and children's services and parenting resources. In making these referrals, we have seen firsthand how the pandemic and resulting effect on the economy has impacted victims. A 34% increase in the number of contacts from 2020 shared they had experienced housing instability and/or homelessness in calendar year 2021.

Since our phone lines opened on February 21, 1996, The Hotline has expanded its reach and services through our digital platforms, which many have shared is a safer way to reach out—especially during the pandemic, including chat and text while providing comprehensive information through our website for those not feeling safe enough to reach out for live services. In 2021, The Hotline received 338,559 calls and 281,634 chats and texts. Our advocates provide services in English and Spanish and in more than 200 other languages through the use of a Language Line. A first-time contact shared they didn't realize resources for domestic violence existed and shared, "I am so glad that you are here and that I got you on

the call. You all are such wonderful people to provide your time and energy supporting survivors of abuse! I finally feel at peace, and I feel like I have a direction to go in! Thank you!"

We have also increased our impact through love is respect. In 2007, The Hotline launched love is respect, an initiative that engages, educates, and empowers young people to prevent and end abusive relationships. love is respect was created in response to a national discourse about the need for prevention services, especially among teens. Among adult victims of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner, 22% of women and 15% of men first experienced some form of partner violence between 11 and 17 years of age.<sup>iii</sup> Nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year.<sup>iv</sup> Teen dating violence is unfortunately common, with 1 in 12 high school students reporting experiencing physical and sexual dating violence.<sup>v</sup>

love is respect is a safe, inclusive space where young people can access information and get help in an environment designed specifically for them. love is respect mobilizes parents, educators, and peers to raise awareness on healthy dating behaviors and how to identify unhealthy and abusive patterns. Teachers, college advisors, and other groups working with young people use our program, including [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org), as a go-to resource and rely on our program to understand what a healthy relationship is, trends in teen dating abuse (such as the rise digital abuse), and learn how they can protect themselves or the teens they care for from relationship abuse.

We also deeply value working in partnership with several national organizations to serve victims with specialized needs. For example, gaps in Native-centered supportive services create unique barriers for Native victims seeking help, and Native victims experience domestic violence at far greater rates than other populations in the United States. With input from tribal leaders, a Native women's council, domestic violence experts, and the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act program, The Hotline and NIWRC launched StrongHearts Native Helpline in March 2017. StrongHearts was initially housed at The Hotline's headquarters in Austin, TX so that its staff could benefit from The Hotline's existing infrastructure, caller application technology, resource database, data collection infrastructure and training resources. After two years working closely with The Hotline, StrongHearts transitioned its headquarters to its permanent location in Eagan, MN in January 2019, offering services 24/7. In November 2020 StrongHearts received their 10,000th call.

In addition, The Hotline works with the Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services (ADWAS) which provides crisis intervention, education, information and referrals for deaf callers through the National Deaf Domestic Violence Hotline. The Hotline partners with ADWAS to supplement these services including support, as appropriate, when ADWAS staff are not able to remain open 24/7.

While we are proud of how we have expanded our reach and services to more survivors than ever before, we are also aware that there are populations we have yet to serve. A prime example of this are contacts we receive from those who choose to cause harm (abusive partners). This accounts for about 9% of our volume. These are people seeking information and support for changing their harmful behaviors. Our advocates do their best to provide support and connect them to local batterers intervention programs and educational resources for help, but more needs to be done. In the United States, resources for those who abuse are very limited and are often court-ordered programs not accessible outside the criminal justice system. If we are ever going to see the end of domestic violence in this country, we must do more to stop abuse before it happens. With additional and specifically dedicated funding, such as the \$1 million

championed by Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-TX), we hope to explore supplemental support and services to help abusive partners recognize their behaviors and access support to change them.

While The Hotline and love is respect offer important emergency crisis intervention and prevention services for victims of domestic and dating violence, our goal is to connect them with local programs that have the resources to help them identify shelter, transitional housing, culturally specific programs, legal assistance, and economic support necessary to help them escape those who abuse. The FVPSA program is the only federal funding source dedicated to domestic violence shelters and programs. It supports lifesaving services including emergency shelters, counseling, and programs for underserved communities throughout the United States and territories. The Administration for Children and Families estimates that domestic violence programs funded through FVPSA provided shelter and nonresidential services to more than 1.2 million survivors. However, 181,364 requests for shelter went unmet in FY2021. The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) 2021 Domestic Violence Counts survey found that in just one day 70,032 victims of domestic violence received services, but another 9,444 requests for services went unmet due to lack of funding. Safety for survivors also requires financial security. Being subjected to abuse is financially devastating for survivors and safety has real costs. A growing body of evidence shows that providing direct cash assistance to survivors is a low-barrier and immediate way to help survivors overcome obstacles to their safety.

Throughout my testimony I have shared with you the tremendous need for and impact of The Hotline's vital services to those seeking help to pursue a safer future and escape abusive relationships. However, the staggering demand and record-breaking volume we are now experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic stress of rising inflation, have made the need for increased federal investment critical. As a result, I urge the Subcommittee to continue its bipartisan support for The Hotline in FY 2023 through an appropriation of \$27 million. These funds would allow us to increase staffing by hiring more than 100 new front-line advocates (including bilingual staff), 25 new staff for program services support (such as program services managers, shift support specialists, and workforce managers), as well as prevention and health relationship specialists for love is respect. Increased resources are also needed to support StrongHearts Native Helpline and ADWAS.

Increased funds are also needed to innovate and invest in additional technology infrastructure and staffing to better meet the increased volume. This includes technological advancements, queue management, triaging, as well as increased capacity overall to ensure our website's direct services platforms and self-service paths are optimized and accessible to all. As The Hotline continues with a mostly remote workforce, we also plan to launch program services in three new hub cities to expand our operations. This will enable us to maximize time zone coverage to better meet the 24-hour demand from those seeking help and safeguard against the impact of natural disasters on our operations, such as the 2021 Texas winter storm which decreased The Hotline's capacity by 45% for five days due to widespread power outages. Lastly, we would like to invest in a national paid public service announcement effort. The Hotline has historically never spent funds on marketing or paid public awareness campaigns, however the recent Google search optimization tool (which caused an approximate 40% increase in volume) is an example of just how pervasive domestic violence is and demonstrates the need to ensure that survivors know about The Hotline's 24/7 services. Survivors are often referred to us through other direct service programs, word of mouth, media referrals, or through outreach done by other programs, hospitals, courts, legal services, and general awareness campaigns about domestic violence.

In conclusion, at The Hotline we envision a world where all relationships are positive, healthy and free from violence. Every hour of every day of the year, through phone, chat and text, The Hotline and its complementary program for young adults, love is respect, work to shift power back to people affected by relationship abuse. It is a vital resource, a link to support and for some, contacting The Hotline may be the first action they take to find safety. Through pandemics, ice storms and power outages, The Hotline cannot shut down, and our staff know it. Many victims of domestic and dating violence are one call, one text, even one chat away from serious, if not lethal violence. We must be there for them, because sometimes there is nothing else that stands between them and danger. A recent contact shared, "This conversation has been incredible; I feel like the tears in my heart are starting to dry up. Thank you for supporting me and helping me reach my own solutions. I am extremely impressed. I feel so much hope and empowerment, and like the healing has begun for me. Thank you for your beautiful words."

We recognize that you face significant budget constraints, but we urge you to fully support funding for the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and to also support funding for additional vital life-saving programs that serve survivors. Thank you again for your continued support for victims of domestic and sexual violence.

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<sup>i</sup> National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Nation Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey, available at [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS\\_Report2010-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> *Id.*

<sup>iii</sup> National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Nation Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey, available at [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS\\_Report2010-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Physical Dating Violence Among High School Students—United States, 2003," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, May 19, 2006, Vol. 55, No. 19.

<sup>v</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey in 2019, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/feature/index.htm>.