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Abusive relations among teens fly under radar

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Teen relationships are often discounted as "puppy love" and not taken seriously by adults.

Neither are the signs of abuse, which can quickly escalate, such as when West Side high school senior Johanna Orozco was shot in the face three weeks ago. Police arrested her ex-boyfriend.

"That's where my pain is," said Cathleen Alexander, executive director of The Domestic Violence Center in Cleveland. "If [Orozco] had known to call the domestic violence hot line, we could have walked her through this."

Orozco, 18, told just a few friends of boyfriend Juan Ruiz's verbal berating, constant phone calls and threats. She eventually gathered courage to break up with him, after which authorities say Ruiz raped her at knifepoint and, after his arrest, shot Orozco in the face March 5.

Ruiz, 17, denies the charges.

Alexander said the system failed to help Orozco in part because police and courts often don't identify crimes committed as part of a teen relationship as domestic violence.

The signs of abuse are also often discounted.

"We really need to think about this as abuse and violence that occurs in any intimate relationship," said Alexander, whose organization goes into 20 or 30 public and private high schools a year to talk with teens about safe, healthy dating relationships.

One in 11 high school students nationwide report being physically hurt by someone they were dating, according to a 2006 Centers for Disease Control report. One in four report verbal, physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

All 50 states have laws that cover domestic violence in dating relationships between people who live or have children together. But many do not address violence in teen relationships.

Only 19 states and the District of Columbia allow teens to go to court without an adult and ask for a protection order. Ohio is not one of them.

Alexandria Ruden, an attorney with Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, said there was a legislative push last year to give Juvenile Court judges the ability to issue and enforce protection orders against minors. The bill was never fully written.

The issue should be revived, said Ruden, who has worked with domestic violence laws for 30 years and co-authored some of the current laws. "In some way, a bill needs to be introduced that addresses teen-dating violence," she said.

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