



GI Bill, colleges failing vets

Iraq War veterans Drew Cameron (l) and Matt Howard (r) are finding it tough to have their schooling paid for thanks to UVM and VA policies. photo by Terry J. Allen

By Terry J. Allen
Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

With his boyish face and soft tangle of curls, Matt Howard looks like he should have carried a fishing rod though a Norman Rockwell summer. Instead, the 26-year-old Vermonter lugged a gun through two tours in Iraq. Now, what the former Marine really wants to wield is a college diploma. But he and other returning veterans are finding it hard to collect the college benefits they expected when they enlisted in the military.

That expectation was fueled by promises from military recruiters and the soldiers' own financial commitment. All new recruits are given a one-time, use-it-or-lose-it opportunity to buy into benefits eligibility by paying \$100 a month for their first year

of service. Any benefits unused 10 years after they leave the military are forever lost, including the \$1,200 "kicker." The almost 30 percent of active duty veterans who bought in and didn't collect their educational benefits over the last decade effectively donated hundreds of millions of dollars to the U.S. Treasury.

Many veterans who applied under the 1984 Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) say they faced black-hole bureaucracy and college costs that far exceeded benefits.

"I was so disgusted by how hard it was to get my college benefits, I just gave up," said Howard about his first experience enrolling in the University of Vermont (UVM). "I volunteered for the Marines, served in Iraq, and I appreciate the pat on the back and being called hero, but the military sells itself on money for college; it is the major recruitment tool.

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Affordable housing at any cost?

By Carrie Chandler
Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

MONTPELIER — For years, Vermonters have heard Gov. Jim Douglas, lawmakers, lenders, developers, and non-profit agencies talk about the drastic need for affordable housing in Vermont.

Little has been done to achieve that yet, but this session, legislators think they have found the answer in the so-called New Neighborhoods Initiative, a bill that will allow towns and developers to bypass the Act 250 process in order to build needed housing.

According to Douglas, the initiative would create housing

"near existing neighborhoods and increase the stock of new housing while respecting the traditional settlement patterns that make Vermont such a unique and wonderful place to live," and will also offer incentives for towns and developers.

"If a property in a new neighborhood is sold as a primary residence, the town will get to keep all of the property tax for the first three years," said John Hall, commissioner of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs. This creates an incentive for towns, "who already bear the burden of affordable housing through subsidies."

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Vermont takes aim at domestic violence

Editor's note: Over the next several weeks, the *Vermont Guardian* will examine the complex nature of domestic abuse that often occurs in homes, but is hardly contained by their walls. This week, we provide an overview of national and state trends. In the coming weeks, we will examine the criminal justice system; how communities are responding to domestic violence; and what is being done in schools and youth programs.

By S. A. Troy
Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

On March 22, 2007, piles of snow from what should have been the last winter storm of the season barricaded parking meters and lined the walkways leading to the State House. Inside the Senate Judiciary's Committee room, four wom-

en sat at the end of an imposing wooden table. Opposite them, Sen. Richard Sears, D-Bennington, chairman of the committee and an imposing figure himself, sat in his high-backed, black leather chair and tried to make the women feel at home.

Pointing a large finger at the microphone planted in front of them, he offered gently, "I'm happy to turn that off if you'd

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like.”
The women looked at one another, then each took her turn shaking her head and responding that it was OK for her testimony be recorded.

For the next two hours, committee members and a standing-room only audience listened as the women recalled their stories of how they survived an abusive husband, boyfriend, or father. Though varying in age, ethnicity, and income status, each had a similar story — the violent or intimidating behavior came out of the blue several months into the relationship, and without the support of the community — even if the support came late, was insufficient, or practically non-existent — none of them would be sitting in the room.

“Domestic violence is very hard to detect, hard to see,” said Heather, who grew up with a father who abused her mother. Though she was never the object of his physical violence, she said fear was a daily part of her life. She was afraid to disobey; she learned how to be quiet, and has worked hard to overcome the impression that family is not safe.

“Jane,” a businesswoman, testified, “I’d always said to myself that if anyone ever struck me that that would be the end of a relationship. I had no plan for what I would do if other tactics were used.” In her case, it was psychological abuse that resulted in stalking. She said that the law enforcement response was critical. An astute officer who understood that she was being stalked, identified that fact for her and initiated the charges. “The tragedy here is that stalking is not well-understood by many people. Taken in isolation the tactics used are not illegal. But view them as a pattern of behavior and you have a different story. In stalking, context is everything. Incidents take on a whole new meaning.”

Vermont is one of the more progressive states in the country when it comes to addressing one of society’s most costly and chronic social issues, domestic violence.

Vermont offers more extensive programming to offenders through its intensive domestic abuse program (IDAP) than any other state, recently adding a pilot program for incarcerated abusers (InDAP). The Agency of Human Services (AHS) is also in the process of a multi-year review of all of its domestic vio-

lence policies that may result in institutionalized best practices for agencies all over the country. However, according to Sears, “Things are getting a little better, but they’re not good enough.”

Sears should know. For the last 15 years, he’s helped pass several critical domestic violence-related statutes including those criminalizing domestic assault and stalking. He also recently retired from a 35-year career working with juvenile offenders, many of whom came from homes where violence was prevalent.

“We’ve all worked on domestic violence legislation piecemeal over the years, and yet we continue to have a significant problem in this state that in some ways has been well-hidden. Until you have a murder or a child so badly abused that they die, that’s when we begin to hear about it, and it’s too late,” Sears said.

In 2006, Vermont experienced a number of devastating acts of violence with links to domestic abuse. In August, Christopher Williams, whose girlfriend had recently broken up with him, allegedly borrowed a gun and while looking for her, shot four people. The shootings resulted in two fatalities, Alicia Shanks, an admired teacher and co-worker in Essex Elementary School where two of the shootings took place, and Linda Lambesis, his ex-girlfriend’s mother. The fourth victim, a male friend of the suspect, was shot in his apartment.

In Massachusetts, where Williams lived previously, police said he had a history of domestic violence convictions resulting in several restraining orders.

Though not known to have had previous contact with each other, Brian Rooney, the suspect in the October 2006 sexual assault and murder of University of Vermont student Michelle Gardner-Quinn, was also the subject of multiple relief from abuse orders and domestic charges.

In November 2006, Carol Lozinski was shot three times in the chest by her ex-boyfriend, Chris Chichester, who then committed suicide in the town of Lyndonville.

In the wake of these high profile cases, the Legislature again focused on domestic abuse. Sears, fellow judiciary committee members Sen. John Campbell, D-Windsor, Sen. Kevin Mullin, R-Rutland, Sen. Ann Cummings, D-Washington, and Sen. Alice Nitka, D-Windsor,

along with Pres. Pro Tem Peter Shumlin, D-Windham, and Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Sen. Susan Bartlett, D-Lamoille, agreed there needed to be a comprehensive approach to the problem.

“We need to devote time to understand what’s working, what’s not working, where are the gaps in services and legislation,” Sears said. As a result, every Thursday morning this session, domestic violence has held center stage.

But, unlike the attention given to weeks of hearings on climate change, this session-long effort has received less media attention.

The committee has heard from a wide array of people from around the state including survivors, advocates, law enforcement, state’s attorneys, and various officials from the Agency of Human Services, which includes several front line departments including corrections, children and families, and economic development, as well as the governor’s Council on Domestic Violence, various county task forces, and prevention and education programs that provide services to schools and workplaces.

Domestic violence’s impact

As defined by the Vermont Department of Children and Families website, domestic violence is: “A pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic coercion that an adult or adolescent uses to obtain and maintain control over their intimate partner.”

According to the 1998 Commonwealth Fund Survey, 31 percent of U.S. women reported being physically or sexually abused by a husband or a boyfriend at some point in their lives.

A 1996 survey by the Advertising Council found that 30 percent of those polled said they knew a woman who has been physically abused by her partner in the past year.

In 2001, a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* revealed that approximately one in five female high school students reported being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. When asked in a poll sponsored by Children Now and health insurance provider Kaiser Permanente, 40 percent of girls age 14 to 17 said they

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The bill would also allow developers to bypass the Act 250 development review process, but Hall noted that developers “will still have to get local permits. It will reduce the cost on permitting so hopefully housing prices will go down.”

“In essence, this bill says that housing is an area where people come first,” said Tayt Brooks of the Homebuilders and Remodelers Association of Vermont, citing the fact that the environment has always been important to Vermonters. Noting that Vermont only produces 35,000 housing units per year, when the state needs to create at least 2,000 more to meet the need, he said, “In the last 10 years, the median purchase price of homes has nearly doubled. We believe that this is a major reason that young people leave Vermont, or don’t come to the state.”

While this bill is gaining the

backing from a wide variety of groups in the state, the relaxation of the Act 250 permitting has caused many to question the intent of the initiative.

“The New Neighborhoods bill represents an unprecedented rollback of Act 250 environmental protections by exempting land in poorly defined, scattered locations outside downtowns, village centers, new town centers, and growth centers from Act 250. If passed, this would be the largest Act 250 rollback in its 37-year history,” said Stephen Holmes of Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC).

Sandy Levine, of the Conservation Law Foundation, agreed, noting that “it is important to have places for people to live, but we shouldn’t do that by throwing out environmental standards and gagging the neighbors for comment in the process.” Act 250 is the pro-

cess through which neighbors learn about and become involved in the permitting for land in their town.

But the proponents say the bill does offer a line of defense for the environment.

“New Neighborhoods will only be in communities that already have development review and subdivision bylaws in place. They will be exempt from Act 250 on the assumption that the town is doing a development review and has a town plan, said Sarah Carpenter, executive director of Vermont Housing Finance Agency.

“Safeguards are still in place to protect the environment,” added Brooks. “Projects will still have to go through town processes. It doesn’t stop the development review or zoning board from having input.”

There is also a concern that the bill will undermine a law passed last year by the Legislature designed to help foster so-called growth centers.

“The growth centers law attempts to focus future growth in downtowns, village centers, new town centers, and lands adjacent to these three areas — all collectively defined as growth centers,” said Holmes. Currently, towns are just getting ready to apply for the growth centers designation. “The New Neighborhoods bill, if passed, would at best distract the attention of state agencies and communities from growth centers implementation, and at worst weaken the growth centers law to the point of irrelevance.” The law strictly defines the process of building within a town, and incorporates Act 250 standards, and supporters see the New Neighborhoods Initiative as an easier and less time consuming option to create housing.

“Any housing initiative should fit in with the growth centers law;

to create a completely separate process that doesn’t fit into that makes no sense,” said Levine.

According to Brooks, “We cannot sit back and wait any longer. Growth centers are so comprehensive. They encompass a majority of the town’s growth within the next 20 years.”

Because of that level of planning, the process to apply for the growth centers designation could take up to three years.

“New Neighborhoods can be incorporated into growth centers, but we are talking about something on a much smaller scale that is needed very quickly,” Brooks said.

Another sticking point for opponents of the bill is the fact that the proposal would allow any housing project to be exempt from Act 250 jurisdiction.

“The density standards are not defined, so you could see large houses on large lots or second home development exempted from Act 250 review,” Holmes said.

Holmes notes that the terms “adjacent” and “community core,” which both appear in the bill as descriptors of where houses may be built, are not defined.

“There is lots of ambiguity here ... houses could be built next to land that is not served by infrastructure, and is not planned for infrastructure and without a definition of ‘adjacent’ this could be miles outside of downtown,” Holmes said.

Carpenter thinks that the bill will do just what it is supposed to do. “This is not, in a sense, an affordable housing bill. It is to encourage good housing planning and to make homes more affordable by increasing the housing stock.”

And that is something that Vermont needs, with the home ownership vacancy rate at 1.2 percent

for 2006, the third lowest in the nation. Although the houses built under the New Neighborhood Initiative would not fall under VHFA’s definition of affordable, Carpenter noted that “the intent of the bill is to encourage developers and communities to build moderately priced housing.”

A median priced home in Vermont is \$197,000. To pay that, a household would need to make \$66,000 a year. With only 32 percent of the households in the state making above that wage, housing is out of reach for many Vermonters.


“This bill will make it easier in communities that welcome housing to build housing,” Carpenter said.

“One of the ways that you deal with the affordable housing problem is to build more housing,” she added.

Will the bill really help Vermont’s housing shortage? Hall believes that it will. “It will allow communities of every size and description to designate areas where they want to put dense housing,” he said.

But others are not so sure. Levine calls for “a more carefully drafted bill that targets incentives to housing in good locations, linked to the growth centers concept, and that doesn’t throw the environment out the window.” Along with VNRC and the Vermont Forum on Sprawl, Levine said, “We have identified areas where this bill could move forward and do what’s it’s supposed to do.”

And according to her, and many others in the state, that is to help create affordable housing.

Although crossover has already occurred, two House committees are reviewing the bill. Though not likely to pass this year, the bill is sure to be on the agenda at the beginning of next year’s session. 

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This is supposedly why I sold my soul to the devil.”

Because many colleges require payment upfront, and benefit checks from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) typically arrive months after the semester begins, veterans often have to pony up thousands of dollars in tuition, fees, and living expenses to enter school. Already stressed as they work to acclimate to civilian life, they are forced to choose between going into debt, missing semesters, or exchanging college dreams for low-wage work to support themselves and their families.

“It creates a significant increase in anxiety in a population that is already anxious,” said Jim Dooley, a VA mental health clinician in Colchester. “There is also a feeling of betrayal; they are angry enough already.”

Gone are the post-World War II days when MGIB’s predecessor, the GI Bill of Rights, helped educate 7.8 million of the war’s 16 million veterans and provided a “magic carpet to the middle class.” That bill fully covered tuition, books, and fees at any public or private U.S. college or job-training program.

Today’s MGIB is meager in comparison. Vets who have served more than three years and are enrolled full-time can typically collect \$1,075 per month for 36 academic months. The \$38,700 total covers about 60 percent of the average cost of college, according to the College Board’s estimates.

While reservists don’t need to pay the \$1,200 to buy into MGIB, their benefits, and the window they have to use them, are prorated by time and type of service and are significantly less than for active duty troops. Some 58 percent of reservists and members of

the National Guard, even those who have served multiple combat tours, have not collected money for education.

A few lucky veterans attend schools that have learned how to work the VA system and have established policies that allow vets to pay when benefits arrive, rather than pre-pay for classes. But in the end, whether the VA educational benefits system works for an individual depends on the cost of the school, the vet’s own economic resources and determination, how knowledgeable and helpful the school is, and luck.

Financial Catch-22

Most schools borrow a page from the military by building in a Catch-22: No matter when the vet notifies the VA, the agency won’t process MGIB paperwork until the vet’s school submits a certificate of enrollment. Although the VA accepts the certificates 3 to 4 months before school starts, most schools won’t certify students until they begin classes. Last fall, the VA took an average of 16 weeks to process paperwork, and they now average between 8 to 12 weeks. Vets are lucky to get fall tuition payments by Thanksgiving.

“By far, the majority of schools are not certifying before school actually starts,” said a New England-based VA official. A regional VA claims examiner puts the figure at “about half.”

Both VA officials requested anonymity because they are not authorized to talk to media.

UVM submits the certificate of enrollment 30 days before classes start, which still “guarantees that VA payments will be months late,” said Marie Johnson, UVM’s associate director for customer service

for student financial services.

Despite the advance submission, it means vets have to wait well into the semester before they see a VA check.

“I’m stressing out because I can’t survive without that check,” says Drew Cameron, who served eight months in Iraq. Now a forestry major at UVM, Cameron enrolled in the Army in hopes of getting a college education. “Every single beginning of school year for six semesters there is this huge lag,” he said of his experiences both at Community College of Vermont where he first enrolled and now at UVM. “I submit my paperwork to the VA on time, but don’t get the check until November.”

UVM gives its 77 vets a break by requiring them to pay only half the tuition upfront every semester, said Johnson, and the rest in three payments. But that means a full-time, in-state student, living off campus, will have to find \$2,500 not just once, but at the start of every academic year.

“Maybe they should take out a loan,” Johnson suggested.

How willing schools are to let vets start classes before paying “depends how much they got burned by vets in the past,” said the regional VA claims administrator.

Here’s the risk: Because MGIB checks are made out directly to students, they can attend classes, drop out, and leave the school to chase down the debt and struggle with the paperwork.

Southern Connecticut State University certifies some 95 percent of its 400 mostly MGIB vets before classes start, says Jack Mordente, the school’s full-time director of Veterans Affairs. “I can’t remember the last time we got stiffed, but

if we get one a semester that’s a lot.”

Johnson also cannot recall when UVM was “left holding the bag” for a vet, but the school puts a block on student records until vets pay. Her hands are tied, she says, by the need to protect the university from the risk that a vet, “understandably,” will use a VA check intended for tuition to meet such unexpected needs as “a broken car or a sick family member.” On occasion her office has suggested to vets that they delay school and work until they save enough to cover the gap.

“Other schools are all over the map,” said Johnson. “If they have deeper pockets they can be more flexible.”

But the system even breaks down when full-tuition funding goes directly to the school as it does for disabled vets. Mike Brennan, who is working toward a master’s in social work, says it took weeks of prodding to get UVM to fax his paperwork to the VA so that he could get the stipend owed to disabled vets. But “at least I was able to start classes on time,” he said.

Howard, who gave up on collecting under MGIB, eventually qualified for disability benefits and plans to continue his education.

Some institutions, despite lim-

ited resources, trust the vets, adjust the rules, provide hands-on counselors, and file electronically. Most of the schools in the City University of New York (CUNY) system certify students online well before classes begin, says Chris Rosa, in the CUNY office of student affairs.

Alexandru Ivan left the Army in December 2006 after two tours in Iraq. By March he was attending a two-year business administration program at LaGuardia College. Tuition at this CUNY branch is \$1,500 a semester, so Ivan has something left over for fees and books, and, at least for now, can supplement living expenses with savings.

“If not for Montgomery, I would not have gone to college,” said the 24-year old vet. “I just couldn’t have paid for it out of my own pocket.”

When Ivan’s VA check was late this spring, “We let him start anyway,” said Stanley Rumph, LaGuardia Community College’s veterans coordinator. “We have the wherewithal, and we take the risk.” Rumph says that vets can go to class even if the school has to wait until end of a semester for the VA to pay up. “And we have never lost money because of it,” he added.

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LaGuardia often checks a box on the VA form requesting a two-month advance payment. It goes to the bursar's office where the student picks it up and signs it over to the school.

"Any school can do that," says Rumph. "The money will come in and these guys are entitled to it."

UVM was not aware of that option, Johnson said.

While the delays are an irritation to more affluent students, those most in need cannot bridge the financial gap.

"UVM and the VA, they are equally culpable," says Barry, who asked us not to print his real name. The 28-year-old Vermonter went with his National Guard unit to Iraq in 2004 when he was in his sophomore year at UVM. When he returned two years later after driving Humvees on IED-strewn roads around Baghdad, what he needed most was to put his life back on track.

Despite a good academic record, he says UVM refused him entry for the spring '07 semester. "UVM told me they hadn't sent in the certificate of enrollment paperwork to the VA, so I couldn't get the benefits in time for the semester. When I asked, they said they don't know how that happened and there was no making it right."

Barry "was never registered," said UVM's Registrar Keith Williams, so he couldn't be certified.

Sympathetic to his plight, Barry's professor and academic advisor let him attend classes during the weeks of limbo, hoping that the bureaucratic logjam would break. "I felt helpless," said Barry's professor. "He wasn't a wandering soul; he was very directed and on-track to do something positive not only for himself but for society, in a productive health science career — a field where we need more people. But he hit roadblocks."

"I got angry enough so that I called [Sen. Bernie] Sanders [I-VT]," Barry said, "and his office had the problem ironed out in a week, but it was too late to enroll for the spring semester." Sanders office confirmed that it had intervened with the VA.

While only the most sanguine expect the vast VA bureaucracy to bend to individual needs, LaGuardia and Southern Connecticut State show that schools can be responsive and flexible. "We clear vets on the GI bill for classes with a notice saying that money will be coming," says Joe Bello, CUNY's veterans office coordinator. "It would be a shame if they had to wait a whole semester just be-

"It's an extremely stressful situation for a newly returned vet. The check is late, the university is breathing down his throat. This is the first dealing with VA that most vets have, and when they come up against shit like this, it discourages them from claiming other benefits."

— Matt Howard, Iraq War veteran

cause [the VA regional office in Buffalo failed them.]

That is what Barry is doing. "I lost two years in the service and now I am losing another half year," he says, adding that he hopes to enroll in the fall.

For now, he is unemployed and his mother is worried. "His life was derailed, he was shot at, his friend was killed, and when he got back, he couldn't continue school. He doesn't need more stress, he needs the structure of college. I can't believe that UVM wouldn't let him go to school. Why don't they give families a break?" she said.

Education: The biggest draw

Vets are troubled not only by when they get their benefits but also by the amount. "They told me I would get all this money for college under the Montgomery bill," said Howard, "but somehow I was so naive that I didn't know it wasn't enough to cover school. They were very convincing."

With 62 percent of surveyed youth telling a Department of Defense (DoD)-sponsored poll that the war on terrorism made them less likely to enlist, military recruiters are hard-pressed to fill quotas. "Educational benefits are a major inducement for many individuals," according to the DoD, "and typically are the reason for enlisting cited by the largest percentage of new recruits."

While a careful read of recruitment material provides an accurate picture of what vets can expect, a cursory glance at the Army website dangles a level of benefits few will reach. "Depending on how long you enlist with the Army and the job you choose, you can get up to \$72,900 to help pay for college," the website promises. "All you have to do is give \$100 a month during your first year of service."

Most vets, however, end up with \$38,700 for 36 academic months.

The small percent who fail to sign up for the \$1,200 "kicker" get no educational benefits at all. "At in-processing before basic training," explained Rob Timmons of the Iraq Afghanistan Veterans Association, "they announce you can choose to have \$100 taken out of your paycheck every month for the next year. For some, it's no big deal. But a lot of the disenfranchised who have never even seen \$1,200 before in their lives don't sign up." By missing that one-time opportunity, soldiers forever lose their eligibility to get educational benefits under Montgomery.


A bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Jim Webb, D-VA, proposes eliminating the \$1,200 kicker and fully funding college.

"At least half of LaGuardia's 113 vets didn't even know they qualified for benefits" when they showed up at his office, says Bello. "I blame the DoD and by extension the VA."

Frustrated by the VA bureaucracy, many vets turn to college administrators who have to tack veterans' concerns and navigating the VA on to myriad other duties.

That seems to be the case at UVM. Williams acknowledged that the VA's time lags combined with the administration's lack of attention to vets' special circumstances creates "a perfect formula for frustration. But we are going to change that," he says, pledging to file earlier using quicker on-line options and give vets more personal attention.

Meanwhile, thousands more war-weary vets returning home are in danger of slipping through MGIB's cracks.

"It's an extremely stressful situation for a newly returned vet," said Howard. "The check is late, the university is breathing down his throat. This is the first dealing with VA that most vets have, and when they come up against shit like this, it discourages them from claiming other benefits, including medical disability, treatments, etc." 

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knew someone their age who had been hit or physically beaten by a boyfriend.

Statistics on the rate of men who are violent toward their partners are harder to find, though according to Mark Larson, the batterer accountability coordinator for the Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (the Network), it is estimated to be around 25 percent.

Experts say this illustrates one of the key perceptions that often color our thinking about domestic abuse — blaming the victim as opposed to the offender.

“What questions you ask indicates how you think about an issue,” says Cate MacLachlan, codirector of the Domestic Abuse Education Project. “Why does she stay?” puts the onus on the victim. “Why does he hit?” gets more to the root of the issue.”

Intimate partner violence (IPV), as the most common form of domestic abuse is often called, is primarily a crime against women though it also happens in same-sex couples of both genders at approximately the same rate as in the heterosexual population. However, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, 85 percent of victims are women, and 15 percent are men.

A 1998 U.S. Department of Justice analysis of crime data revealed that while women are less likely than men to be victims of violent crimes overall, women are five to eight times more likely than men to be victimized by an intimate partner.

The resulting costs to society of domestic violence can be staggering.

In 2003, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control estimated that IPV costs exceeded \$8.3 billion that year, the vast majority of that in direct costs of medical and mental health care services. The remaining billions include the indirect cost of lost productivity, an estimated 8 million days of paid work, the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs, and almost 5.6 million days of household productivity.

The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse suggests that domestic violence may be the single major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in this country. Studies also show that millions of U.S. children each year, numbers ranging from 3.3 to 10 million, witness domestic violence at home with long-term effects on their development and

understanding of relationships.

In her testimony on April 12 before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Margaret Joyal, outpatient director of Washington County Mental Health Services, discussed the direct link between domestic violence and trauma, especially for children who may be witnesses though not subject to abuse themselves.

“In the last 10 years, studies have shown that witnessing violence may be more harmful than direct violence, since the child has no way to control it. And helplessness is one of the key factors in trauma severity,” Joyal said.

Domestic violence in Vermont

Contradicting some national reports that show domestic violence incidents decreasing along with overall crime statistics, domestic abuse in Vermont is rising both in numbers and in brutality.

In 2006, the Network, a federally-mandated umbrella organization that works with all 16 domestic and sexual violence programs across the state, provided services to 8,692 Vermonters and answered 17,172 calls on their hotline. This was a 15 percent increase from last year. In 1982, the first full year the Network began tracking the numbers of victims and their families aided, 1,355 adults and 1,190 children were served.

In Vermont, domestic violence is the leading cause of violent death.

The 2007 Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission Report, established by Gov. Howard Dean in 2002, recently reported that in the last 12 years 49 percent of all Vermont homicides can be linked to domestic violence. When the data includes suicides, the percentage increases to 61 percent.

Nationally, domestic violence accounts for 20 percent of all homicides. Due to Vermont’s rural nature, there are fewer instances of “non-domestic” violence than in urban areas. However, that only shows that the state is more susceptible to intimate partner violence.

As a member of the Appropriations Committee, Sears sees how much domestic violence is costing Vermont just in the prison system. “When we started looking into this, we began to find that 20 percent of all those incarcerated are connected with



Flowers were left outside the Essex Elementary School last year after a teacher was killed when domestic violence allegedly spilled into the workplace.
photo by Amanda Cashin

domestic violence” (DV).

According to John Perry, the director of research and planning for the Department of Corrections, “If we look at the population with any DV related charge in their history, the number goes up to 30 percent.”

This year, the correctional budget is \$128 million. By contrast, the budget for higher education is \$80 million.

The cost in the criminal justice system is seen in other statistics, too. According to the National Center for Women and Policing, domestic violence related crimes accounts for 40 percent of all calls to police, and one-third of all of law enforcement’s time.

Yet TJ Anderson, the domestic violence training specialist for the Vermont State Police Academy, said only 43 of the 700 hours spent during full-time academy training are domestic violence related.

“Currently, part-time officers are not required to take any domestic violence training,” said Anderson. “And officers are not required to take any additional DV-related training to maintain their certification after initial training has been completed.”

While acknowledging the central role that the criminal justice system plays in addressing this problem, Laura Subin, director of the Governor’s Council, the statewide domestic violence task force, warns against expecting it to carry too much of the burden.

“The judicial system is not solely responsible for solving domestic violence,” Subin told the Senate Judiciary Committee. “All other systems must play their part in a coordinated way.”

Coordinating the response

Experts around the state believe that with all its complexity, eradicating domestic violence will not be easy, especially given the fact that not all abusive behavior is illegal.

For instance, undermining someone’s self-confidence by being hypercritical about appearance or intelligence, controlling who a person sees or what a person reads, or even preventing someone from getting a job or having access to a bank account, are not against the law. Yet, many of these are common tactics used by abusers to control their partners and may be a precursor to violence.

The key to detecting the subtle signs of domestic abuse is to better coordinate services and approaches, and to treat domestic violence as a social issue for all to embrace, not just a private matter that women face.

That’s the message of Sherry Burnette, who is currently the AHS trauma coordinator and a veteran in this field. She served 10 years as a social worker in an inner-city emergency room and seven years as victim services advocate in the Vermont correctional system.

“Things are improving because we understand these efforts have to be coordinated. It’s not just about advocates serving victims: Everybody has to do their part from health services to corrections. I also believe until we really start looking at prevention and stop looking at victims as if they have an illness, like the situation just happens to them, we’ll

never eradicate this problem,” Burnette told the *Guardian*. “In domestic abuse there is always a perpetrator and until we begin to work on that side of the equation then it will continue to be seen as a woman’s problem as opposed to a social issue. We ask every woman at her OB/GYN appointment does she feel safe at home. Why aren’t we asking every boy and man during his physical, how are you getting along with your family, do you have problems with anger, do you have someone to talk to?”

Sarah Kenney, the Network’s public policy coordinator, agrees, noting that there is no one solution.

“The more we can have an ongoing conversation about domestic violence and the way our culture condones or condemns, the better chance we have of ending it. However there is no silver bullet,” she said.

Sears is hopeful that this session-long discussion on domestic violence will lead not only to new domestic violence legislation that will help reduce the criminal numbers, but also more awareness of the issue. He hopes a bill will be introduced in January 2008.

“One of the best outcomes from these hearings may be the fact that we’re getting people to talk about domestic violence,” Sears said. He compares the issue to cancer or alcoholism, which were taboo topics when he was growing up. He recalls people used to suffer terribly, and in silence. “Now we have walks for survivors; we celebrate survivors. Shouldn’t we also celebrate survivors of domestic violence?”