



Members of the Gloucester Coalition for the Prevention of Domestic Violence gather outside City Hall. (From left) Deborah Konwiser, William Greenbaum, Mayor Bruce Tobey, Cindy Juncker, Judy Geneen, Nicole Richon Schoel, Marsie Silvestro, and the Rev. Richard Simeone.

## Gloucester puts batterers on notice

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police, schools, health care professionals, elder advocates, religious leaders, and advocates for battered women and children.

Robinson, whose group grew out of a 1998 community health assessment that identified domestic violence as one of eight public health priorities, said the signs put perpetrators on notice that Gloucester strictly enforces domestic abuse laws. Just as important, she said, "it's an invitation to the victims that it will be increasingly safe in this city to report their abuse and do something about it."

"You can't enforce what you don't know about. The first step is to break the silence," Robinson said.

Next steps include training city workers to spot signs of domestic violence and assist victims in getting help, strengthening teen dating violence and grade-school bullying awareness programs in schools, and possibly creating support groups aimed at helping change batterers' behavior, said Nicole Richon Schoel, Cape Ann program director for Help for Abused Women & their Children. The coalition is considering distributing pamphlets about domestic violence to couples seeking marriage licenses at Gloucester City Hall, she said.

Robinson said a concrete action plan would probably emerge from a "domestic violence summit" involving community leaders and residents in the next year.

"We, the coalition, chose, with the mayor's support — and certainly the mayor chose — to go public before we had a citywide action plan precisely because you have to involve everybody in creating the plan," she said.

For Richon Schoel, who has counseled hundreds of victims since HAWC opened its Gloucester office in 1994, the city's action provided a "feeling of sharing the burden."

"It's basically a breakthrough in terms of who is responsible," she said. "It's a shift in responsibility and awareness."

While actually making Gloucester domestic violence-free remains a vision, the resolution makes the problem everybody's business, coalition members say.

"There is not an element of society that is immune from this problem," said Tobey, who issued the proclamation on the basis of work done by the coalition over the past year.

Gloucester Police Chief James Marr said a day literally does not go by that his department doesn't receive a domestic abuse report. Last year, the department recorded 380 domestic violence calls, which led to 179 arrests, he said. Stephen O'Connell, spokesman for the Essex district attorney, said 259 domestic violence-related restraining orders were issued in Gloucester District Court last year, and 146 have been taken out so far this year.

"The problem is extensive. There is no getting away from that," Marr said, adding that, while the police department has made progress through its work with HAWC and other agencies, "the reality is there is more domestic violence going on out there than is being reported."

As large as the problem seems now, coalition members expect an increase in reported cases because of stepped-up publicity and a greater perception among victims that Gloucester is a safe place to speak out and protect themselves.

In the year after Cambridge passed its resolution in 1994, reported cases of domestic violence shot up nearly 15 percent, said Nancy Ryan, executive director of the Cambridge Commission on the Status of Women.

The commission, a city department, recently found that the number of domestic violence restraining orders in Cambridge rose consistently between 1994 and 1999, while those in the rest of Middlesex County declined, Ryan said. That information, obtained from police and court databases, could indicate that increased awareness about domestic violence has prompted more victims to take action.

Beals, of Jane Doe Inc., said there is no question Cambridge's declaration of zero tolerance led to identification and filling of gaps in services, and better coordination among city departments and private agencies. The ability to see the size of a community's domestic violence problem is often obscured when individual groups focus on separate issues, Beals said.

"It's really the connecting the dots that makes a difference," she said. "I think community-wide commitments like this are enormously important. Domestic violence can end. I think we sometimes forget that. What it requires is a collective commitment to speak up."