



Addressing Domestic Violence Locally and Internationally

Soroptimist International of the Americas is an international volunteer service organization for business and professional women. The first Soroptimist club was formed in 1921 by a group of 80 women in Oakland, Alameda County, California, USA. The name Soroptimist is a coined name meaning “best for women. Soroptimist International of the America’s mission is to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world. Soroptimists are business and professional women of all ages, cultures and ethnic groups. Soroptimist International members reside in about 120 countries throughout the world. Soroptimist International (the organization’s parent organization) has about 95,000 members. Soroptimist International of the Americas has about 45,000 members. Soroptimist International of the Americas’ clubs are located throughout these 19 countries and territories: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guam, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, United States and Venezuela.

In 1994, Soroptimist International of the Americas formally adopted the prevention of domestic violence as a major focus. We have approached the problem in a number of different ways. First, we have designed and administered international projects and have encouraged all of our clubs to participate. These programs have been relatively simple in order to encourage participation and to have them appeal cross-culturally. Second, we have provided knowledge and funds so that local clubs could address the specific needs in their communities. This is particularly important because in the 19 countries and territories of Soroptimist International of the Americas, the state of awareness about and services for domestic violence are vastly different. Finally, through a number of projects, we address the issues that make women vulnerable to violence, providing them with the tools to live lives free of poverty. It is necessary to raise awareness, provide services to victims and address the root causes of violence. We feel that a multi-dimensional approach is necessary if any real progress is to be made in ending violence—all types of violence—against women.

Domestic Violence as a Workplace Concern

Soroptimist International of the Americas has long encouraged clubs to focus on domestic violence as a workplace issue. Women do not leave abuse behind when they go to work: their abusers often harass them at work, by telephone or e-mail. Abusers may also go to their victims’ workplaces and harass and threaten them and their co-workers. Some may argue that domestic violence is a personal problem and that employers have no reason or obligation to get involved. The reality is, however, that it is in the self-interest of employers to take steps to protect and assist employees who are the victims of domestic violence. The United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence equals \$727.8 million, with more than 7.9 million paid workdays lost each year. The American Institute on Domestic Violence estimates that, in the United States, employers lose between \$3 and \$5 billion every year in absenteeism, lower productivity, higher turnover and health and safety costs associated with domestic violence. As working women, Soroptimists are in an ideal position to address this issue.

Currently, Soroptimists participate in an annual event, the *Soroptimist Workplace Campaign to End Domestic Violence*, designed to focus attention on domestic violence as a workplace concern. Each year, on November 25 (the International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women), Soroptimist club members distribute thousands of purple cards (the color associated with domestic violence) containing

domestic abuse prevention information and hotline numbers. This campaign reaches out to women in the workplace, since most domestic abuse victims are employed outside the home, and violence at home often spills over into the workplace. In addition to distributing hotline cards, clubs also hold awareness and educational events in their communities and workplaces. In 2002, the campaign received an International Advocacy/Policy Achievement award from the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) Associations Make a Better World program.

To assist clubs, SIA added a new component to the domestic violence workplace campaign this year. *The Domestic Violence Workplace Policies* have been produced and made available for club members to institute domestic violence guidelines in their workplaces. Whether business owners or employees of large or small organizations, Soroptimists advocate for businesses to institute domestic violence workplace policies. Not only can policies assist women who are victims, they will also raise awareness about domestic violence with other employees.

Workplace policies should include a policy statement and a definition of domestic violence. Employers should offer an educational session to employees about recognizing and dealing with domestic violence. The policies should address employees who are perpetrators of domestic violence and offer a list of current local resources that can be accessed for additional support. Most importantly, policies need to address both employee and employer responsibilities. For example, an employee who is the victim of domestic violence would need to alert her supervisor, executive director or human resources office that she has been a victim in order for the employer to respond. The employer could then, for example, screen the employee's emails or telephone calls, provide an escort to and from transportation, allow the flexible use of leave time for doctors, lawyers or court appointments or change the employees workspace to a more secure area.

As part of this program, Soroptimist International of the Americas adopted workplace policies to inform and protect our employees from domestic violence. The Soroptimist workplace policies are provided as a sample to clubs as part of the *Domestic Violence Workplace Policies*. We will also offer annual staff education to ensure our employees are aware of domestic violence and how to access needed resources or how to approach a fellow employee who they suspect might be a victim.

As a public service, Soroptimist International of the Americas offers a white paper on domestic violence and the workplace on its public web site. *Domestic Violence as a Workplace Concern* provides the general public with information about why domestic violence is a workplace issue and why businesses and employers should address it.

Supporting Local-Level Projects

Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls — Many Soroptimist clubs provide direct assistance to local domestic violence shelters in their communities. Through the Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls program, clubs can receive grants (in amounts ranging from \$1,000–\$10,000) for initiating or continuing innovative local projects that benefit women and girls. Many of these grants are awarded for local domestic violence projects. Soroptimist funds about \$175,000 annually in Club Grants. In 2001, the program earned an ASAE Award of Excellence. Recently supported club projects addressing domestic violence include:

- SI/Anderson, IN, USA, \$5,000, *Robbie's Room*: The club is using grant funds to furnish the children's room of a new domestic violence shelter. Members select items and set up the learning area.
- SI/Blackfoot, ID, USA, \$5,000, *Domestic Violence Safety Project*: The purpose of this project is to remove asbestos tile flooring from the local domestic violence shelter.
- SI/Caldwell, ID, USA, \$9,000, *Reaching and Teaching Teens*: This project provides teens with clear and accurate information about domestic violence and sexual assault.
- SI/Red Bluff, CA, USA, \$6,500, *Bring ATV into the 21st Century Technology*: This project assists the local domestic violence agency in upgrading its computer technology.

- SI/Rockwall, TX, USA, \$4,000, *Saving Today and Recovering Tomorrow*: This project provides the funding for household supplies for victims of domestic violence leaving emergency shelters and transitioning to independent living.
- SI/Stoney Creek-Niagara, Canada, \$3,000, *Comfort Kits*: This club provides toiletry and clothing kits to victims of sexual or domestic violence.
- SI/Haldimand-Norfolk, Canada, \$10,000, *Quetzal Family Homes Backyard*: This grant helps the club to provide a safe outdoor area for women and children staying at a domestic violence shelter.
- SI/White Rock, Canada, \$10,000, *Re-Start Surviving Today and Restarting Tomorrow*: The club provides the basic household necessities for domestic violence survivors to establish independent living.

Women's Opportunity Awards — Soroptimist also addresses the economic component that often forces women to stay in abusive situations—and the lack of resources available to these women once they do leave—through its Women's Opportunity Awards program. This program provides cash grants to women who must obtain additional job training or education to realize their goal of economic independence. Each year, more than \$1 million in Women's Opportunity Awards help women enter or return to the work force in order to support themselves and their families. Although the program is open to all head-of-household women demonstrating financial need, many Women's Opportunity Award recipients are domestic violence survivors. In 2001, the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) named Soroptimist to its Honor Roll for this program, and in 2003, the program received ASAE's Award of Excellence in the Associations Advance America award program.

Past Domestic Violence Initiatives

Since 1994, Soroptimist has conducted several comprehensive projects aimed at preventing and ending domestic violence. These include:

- *Every Home a Safe Home* — Soroptimist joined with the National Coalition against Domestic Violence (NCADV) to produce and distribute *Every Home a Safe Home*, an informational resource for women trying to leave abusive situations and those who provide services to these women. Soroptimist clubs and NCADV distributed more than 100,000 copies of the award-winning *Every Home a Safe Home* booklets in six languages and Braille to women and social service agencies around the world. Soroptimist contributed more than \$100,000 in funding for this joint project. For its efforts, Soroptimist received the NCADV Allies against Violence Award, which honors corporate or philanthropic groups that make a difference in the lives of domestic violence survivors.
- *Domestic Violence Prevention Grants* — In 2001, Soroptimist awarded \$30,000 in grants to agencies in Paraguay, the Philippines and Ecuador that provide information and assistance to women who are victims of domestic violence. Soroptimist targeted specific areas to help close the gap between countries and geographic areas that have victim services and those that don't. The funds have been used to stabilize the organizations' ongoing projects while helping them carry out new initiatives to assist women.
- *September 11th Disaster Relief* — After ensuring that victims of the September 11th terrorist attacks and their families were provided for, Soroptimist International of the Americas donated \$40,000 in disaster relief funds to four lower Manhattan agencies that work to prevent and eliminate domestic violence. The New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) Center for Women and Families, the New York Asian Women's Center (NYAWC), Sanctuary for Families, and Barrier Free Living each received a \$10,000 grant to help restore services that were negatively affected as a result of the attacks in New York City. In 2002, additional donations of more than \$44,000 were made to NYANA and NYAWC to ensure continued and effective service to all clients, bringing the total contributions to about \$84,000.
- *Legislative Guide: Domestic Violence (Reports on 17 Soroptimist Countries)* was produced in 1998. The *Legislative Guide* was the only publication of its kind to make a comparative study of the legislative and cultural practices of different countries, which makes it an invaluable tool for advocating changes in legislative practice. This publication was available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese.