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A day in the life of a social worker

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If her mom heard the stories Chelsea Christensen hears every day, she would freak out.

Christensen is a mobile crisis team case worker and works as a social worker for Community Abuse Prevention Services Agency. She said working with domestic violence is a job for people who can successfully separate themselves from work. Although she said she did not plan on working at CAPSA before she did an internship there, something inside her clicked and she decided to stay.

"I think you have to be a person who can handle it, and I didn't think I would be until I started doing it," she said. "You have to be able to handle it yourself. It's really hard to hear their stories, but at the same time, with all the education they've given me, I feel it makes a big difference knowing you're helping someone through it. It's a huge boost for me because it's like someone going from being afraid in their own home to being empowered to be themselves and know they don't have to depend on another person."

When she first arrives at the office on an average work day, Christensen said there is a briefing meeting to report abuse calls from the previous night. These calls are called advocate calls, she said, and are organized into their own files which are given out to particular caseworkers during the meeting. The average number of files she receives per week is about three, although she said this last week she received a file every day.

When an advocate call comes into CAPSA in the middle of the night, volunteers are notified. These volunteers, she said, go meet the victim at CAPSA or the hospital. Christensen said the volunteers are there to help with a protective order, to meet and talk with them, or to help with a rape exam if needed.

"(An advocate call is) if there is a domestic violence call and the police call us and want us to go talk to the victim or a victim calls in the night and wants to talk to an advocate, just any time. We've got volunteer service 24 hours," Christensen said.

After receiving the case file from the advocate call, she said she reviews the information to make sure it is complete. She then enters the info into the database and calls the victim sometime during the day, she said.

"I see if they need to come into shelter or want to come and talk to me about anything," she said.

Most of the people who come into the shelter, she said, know they want to come into shelter very first and are normally checked in during the night after they call CAPSA. There are 32 beds available at CAPSA for men, women and children, she said, and the shelter (since she has worked there) has never been empty.

If a victim decides to come in and talk to Christensen, she said she provides education about domestic violence and tells them what their options are. Talking to victims can also happen over the phone, she said, and sometimes the phone calls are anonymous. The goal, though, is to let the victims become

educated about abuse, she said.

"It's like educational counseling," she said. "We're not therapists so we can't give therapy, but what I will do is ask them to explain what happened to them, and then I'll say this is what domestic violence looks like, these are the cycles and patterns that it follows, do these things look familiar to you?"

If the victim said these cycles and patterns do look familiar, Christensen said she delves a little deeper and asks what is specific to the victim and what the victim can do to recognize or prevent these things in the future. After the first time meeting with a victim, she said she lets the victim know whatever happens after this is in their control.

"If they don't want to come in and talk to me anymore they don't have to, but if they want to talk to somebody they can come in and talk to me if they want to," she said.

Christensen said her day is also filled with client walk-ins on top of the clients she talks to listed in the files she receives in the morning.

Being the mobile crisis team caseworker, Christensen is over the team of volunteers who are called to help during the night.

A protective order, she said, is something she does a lot and is a court order to prevent domestic violence. This is a civil order that has criminal violations, she said.

"Domestic violence, obviously, is against the law, but it is a really hard thing to prove when the police come to your house unless you've got bruises that are visible," Christensen said. "So a protective order says you can't commit domestic violence but you (the respondent) also can't have contact with this person, you have to stay away from the home."

If a protective order is violated then the respondent can go to jail, she said. The protective order, she said, is to prevent the domestic violence from happening.

Christensen, who can carry 50 to 70 clients at a time, said maybe only five out of those clients are male.

The days that are really hard for Christensen, she said, are the days when she spends a lot of time with a client to have the client decide to go back to the abusive environment later that night.

"One of the most important things is they know there is a safe place they can go, so if I've created an environment in my office that they know that I'm not going to judge them when they walk back in the door and say, 'I told you so, you shouldn't have gone back,'" she said. "That is what I can hold onto on those days that are really hard, that I planted a seed. I've done my job to the best of my ability, and I need to let them choose for themselves."

Some situations, she said, can be dangerous due to the nature of the work.

"I know that it would be really easy for an abusive spouse to follow their spouse to CAPSA and recognize the caseworker," she said. "So, there are precautions that we take, not listing phone numbers or giving out last names to people who don't need it."

Christensen said CAPSA is prepared in case such a situation would occur since there are panic buttons and locks located throughout the premise.

When a volunteer is not available to meet with a victim in the middle of the night, she said she is called as a last resort. Since being a full-time worker at CAPSA for about seven months, she said she has met about five victims during the night.

"This kind of creates an issue separating home and work time because it's during my home time that I have to go, and that's kind of a hard thing."

When she gets home from work, Christensen said she needs about a half hour to find a space between her home life and work life. She may turn on the TV for a few minutes and try to distract herself from the emotions felt throughout her day. Although the job gets easier the longer she works there, Christensen said being objective with her emotions provides the best help for clients. Trying to remain objective allows her to not be too involved, she said, as well as making sure to understand how to separate what is happening in her life from someone's crisis.

"In my experience, abuse in general creates crisis for people so that's what they are used to," she said. "They are constantly afraid or have turmoil in their life, and they constantly carry it around with them. So when they come in to talk with us, it doesn't just go away. It's really easy to get caught up in someone else's thing, especially when you're trying really hard to help them."

Having good boundaries and keeping a sense of humor helps make a social worker's load not as heavy, she said. A professional boundary she said case workers need to maintain is creating friendships with the clients.

"It's important to have a professional working relationship," she said. "When you cross that boundary and become somebody's friend, you are almost too involved to help anymore."

Another important thing is to be aware of herself, she said, because it is easy to get burned out. CAPSA staff, however, do a good job at taking care of the employees' well-being, she said.

"They give us time to go into another caseworkers office and talk about what happened that day," she said. "Everything is confidential so I can't come home and tell my husband anything, so it's nice to be able to talk to people at work about things."

CAPSA services are free and confidential. The 24-hour crisis line is 753-2500. CAPSA serves all victims of abuse.

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