

MAHEC Partners with Helpmate To Reduce Domestic Violence

Family Health Clinics Implement Intimate Partner Violence Screening and Response Training



Dan Frayne, MD, family physician and medical director for MAHEC's family health centers, explores health questions with a patient at a well-woman visit using screening tools developed in collaboration with community members.

If you are a woman between 18 and 65, your next well-woman visit at a MAHEC family health center will include the same screening questions you are used to answering about your level of physical activity, alcohol and tobacco use, and your overall emotional health. Your answers will help your healthcare provider determine if you are at risk for certain illnesses or chronic health conditions.

This year's well-woman visit will include a few questions you may never have been asked before, questions that can predict whether you have a 70 percent or higher risk for stroke, heart disease and alcohol abuse and a 60 percent higher risk of asthma. Here's one of them:

"Within the last year, have you been afraid of your partner or ex-partner?"

This question and three others are part of a new intimate partner violence (IPV) screening protocol that has been put in place at all six MAHEC Family Health Centers.

According to recently published data from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, **more than one in three women has experienced violence by an intimate partner** at some point in her life. Despite IPV's prevalence, medical providers have not typically screened for it until now.

"We know that survivors are 4 times more likely to seek help after talking with a healthcare professional about abuse," shares Jeff Heck, MD, MAHEC president and CEO. "And research shows they are 2.6 times more likely to leave an abusive relationship. These important conversations with a provider can literally save a life."

Saving lives is what spurred [Helpmate](#), Buncombe County's domestic violence agency, to partner with MAHEC on an IPV screening grant from the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Office on Women's Health at the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In 2013, there were eight domestic violence homicides in the greater Asheville area, which ranked Buncombe County second in the state for IPV-related deaths and was on par with counties nearly four times its size like Mecklenburg.

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"Helpmate is grateful for the opportunity to partner with MAHEC on this project," says April Burgess-Johnson, executive director of Helpmate. "We know that early intervention and connection with advocacy

services reduces the risk of domestic violence homicide for IPV victims."

"Healthcare providers are uniquely positioned to be able to ask patients about these issues in a safe and supportive environment and then to immediately connect them with survivor services," she explains. "Doing so literally saves lives."

MAHEC is one of eight implementation sites across the state for this grant that has enabled Helpmate to provide IPV training this summer and fall to more than 119 family healthcare providers and staff across MAHEC's family health centers including those at its Biltmore, Cane Creek, Enka/Candler, Newbridge, and Swannanoa locations.

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"People may be hesitant to ask about intimate partner violence because they don't have a clear plan of what to do if they discover someone has been abused," explains Julie Shelton, MPH, a quality improvement specialist and IPV trainer at MAHEC. "Helpmate's intensive training ensures providers know how to help their patients."

According to Shelton, you should never encourage someone to leave an abusive partner unless they have a safety plan because leaving without one puts them at risk of more harm or even death.

MAHEC providers and medical staff are trained to ask questions in a manner that protects patients and assesses their current level of danger. The four IPV screening questions are simple but powerful and take only a few moments to answer but can help change a life.

If a patient discloses that she is or has been in an abusive relationship within the past year, providers will encourage her to call Helpmate during the appointment to create a safety plan. If the patient isn't ready to make the call, the provider or one of MAHEC's behavioral health professionals can help her develop a plan.

Only a few months after implementation, the new screening program has already helped a number of women move toward safety.

"Everyone deserves a life free of fear and to be treated with dignity and respect," shares Dan Frayne, MD, medical director for MAHEC's family health centers. "Domestic violence is a disease that affects us all, and to stop it, we all need to stand up and be involved."

More than 350 MAHEC patients have been screened so far, and some patients have revealed they are in or have recently left abusive relationships. Providers are encouraging these patients to reach out to Helpmate to make a plan and to access counseling, resources and emergency shelter, if needed.

Over the next year, thousands of MAHEC family health patients will be asked about safety in their intimate relationships. And their providers will know what to do if they need help.

*If you or someone you know is a victim of domestic violence, call the **Helpmate Crisis Hotline** at 828-254-0516.*



Sara's silhouette and story are displayed in the lobby of MAHEC's Family Health Center at Biltmore as part of Buncombe County's [Project Still Standing](#) campaign to increase awareness about sexual and domestic violence.