

## Giving Women the Strength to Break the Cycle of Violence

**"S**o many of the women who call us say that they have been carrying our number around for six months or even a year, but they were afraid to call," says Hanka Konecna, a psychologist at Hope Center, a crisis center for victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Petržalka, Slovakia. That's the nature of IPV, she continues, noting that the many myths that cloak abuse may keep victims away from the help they so desperately need.

"The situation in Slovakia is similar to other countries in the region. People tend to believe that family problems should stay in the family, not be aired in public. Prevailing attitudes also place blame for the abuse on the victim—she must have done something to provoke it. Even the women themselves often think they deserve such treatment, that it is normal," the 22-year-old Konecna explains, her eyes flashing angrily as she

dismisses these age-old myths as the nonsense they are. "Things are slowly starting to change, though, because we are getting more and more calls from friends, family, and neighbors of women who are being abused. They all want to know what they can do to help."

Established in 1998 by AIHA's Petržalka/Kansas City partners to provide assistance to women who are victims of IPV, as well as support services for their children, Hope Center has approximately 300 women each year who come in for counseling or other services at least three times. The hotline operated by Center staff gets nearly 800 calls annually— not just from Petržalka, a sprawling concrete jungle just across the Danube from Bratislava, but from all over the country. "We have a total of 30 volunteers; half of that number come in at least once a week," Konecna explains, noting that in addition to counselors and

psychology students from local universities, other volunteers include healthcare workers, legal professionals, and teachers.

"We offer social, legal, and psychological counseling, as well as a self-help group that meets twice each month and, although we don't yet have a crisis center of our own, we do cooperate with other groups throughout the area that have secret houses that provide shelter to women in critical situations,"



PHOTO: KATHRYN UTMAN

Psychologist Hanka Konecna (center) with two women—Hela (left) and Tamara (right)—who turned to Hope Center for help as they worked to extricate themselves from abusive relationships.

Konecna states. "We often help our clients find permanent housing and try to place them in jobs if need be, so they can be more self-sufficient."

Because so many victims of abuse have grown used to the indifferent—or even hostile—attitudes of family, healthcare professionals, police, and others they may have turned to for help, they are often surprised to find people willing to do whatever it takes to get them away from their abuser, Konecna says. "An abused woman is so confused and alone. The abusive partner works hard to cut her off from people who could help, and her feelings of shame and worthlessness further isolate her. But, by the time she calls or comes into the Center, she has already begun to question her situation. She is curious about whether the violence is normal and wants to know what her options are."

This little crack in the brittle wall that

AIHA's Healthy Communities Program moves partners outside hospital walls and into the heart of the populations they are seeking to serve by helping them link stakeholders—from teachers and religious leaders to business owners and government officials—in an effort to address the issues of greatest concern to their citizens. In a suburb of the Slovakian capital of Bratislava, AIHA's Petržalka/Kansas City partners established Hope Center, a crisis center for victims of intimate partner violence, to shine a spotlight on the problem and help women break free from their abusive relationships. This is the story of one of Hope Center's counselors; the story of a woman she helped is on the other side.

victims of IPV erect around themselves is what Konecna and her colleagues at Hope Center need. It is how they gain the access necessary to make these women realize that their situation is anything but normal. "Of course, each woman is different, but they all want to find their way out of the cycle of violence. We work with them, attempting to make them see that men who are abusive seldom change. Through a combination of individual and group therapy sessions, we try to make them see that other women have gone through similar circumstances and survived," she says.

Even with all of the counseling and support available at the Center, about 10 percent of the women they see wind up going back to their abusers. "Many women think that even an abusive man is better than no man at all, so it can be a struggle to build up what IPV has stripped away. That's why I feel good when I am able to help someone like Tamara," Konecna concludes. "She survived so much and still has such a kind, good heart. It's not an easy thing for her to cut herself off from the man who abused her; she still loves him. But, now she loves herself more and that is the first step."

For more information on AIHA, visit [www.aiha.com](http://www.aiha.com).

