

Voices Against Violence welcomes new director

By Scott Calzolaio

Daily News Staff

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Voices Against Violence Director Patricia Hohl at SMOC building office Tuesday. [Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman]

FRAMINGHAM – After a few months on the job, Patricia Hohl finds every day both rewarding and challenging.

As the new director of Voices Against Violence, a Framingham-based nonprofit that serves victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence, she listens to tough stories each day. Then she and her staff figure out how to help and protect their clients.

“It sounds like a cliché, but it truly means a lot to me to make a difference in my own community. It’s just something I believe in as a human being,” said Hohl, who took over as director in June. She replaced Mary Gianakis, who led the agency for two decades.

The goal of the agency is to prevent domestic violence and sexual abuse, and help survivors forge a new life. All services are free and confidential.

She came to the job with the goal of increasing resources available to a growing number of victims and to better immerse her staff in the greater Framingham community. By teaching

her counselors and volunteers the strategies she’s learned over a career in nonprofit management, Hohl hopes to make an already successful organization flourish further.

“Being able to help more people means having more staff and doing more outreach, and that takes manpower, time, and money,” she said. “So, I’m definitely thinking about that.”

The organization is funded largely by the department of public health, and through their annual fundraiser, the Purple Passion 5K, which takes place Saturday. [Registration is open online](#) until Thursday and again the morning of the race.

Hohl managed several nonprofits over the years but, in a career change, took a job as a professor of Arts management at Dean College in Franklin. After a few years of teaching, however, she missed the “boots on the ground work” of nonprofit organizations.

She went on to run the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center in Newburyport, where she oversaw the implementation of a Domestic Violence High Risk Team model under the U.S. Department of Justice. Part of her job was to travel around Massachusetts and the country training people who to use the model to protect people at high risk of being abused or worse.

“We were bringing in a risk-assessment tool they were to use on-scene so that they could evaluate if someone was in severe danger, or at risk of being killed, quite frankly,” she said.

Hohl taught a number of these strategies to a range of people from all demographics. She trained volunteers and police officers, some of whom, she said, were more receptive to the training than others.

At one point she trained police officers in very large urban police department and received pushback and eye-rolling, she said. Though it was a challenge to get through to the officers, when she returned to the department a few months later she was surprised, and motivated, by the results.

“I had officers come up to me who were really quite affected by using this tool,” she said. “They told me that it really changed the way we see things, and how it helped the victims see the danger they were in, which was something (the victims) hadn’t realized before.”

Kelly Dunne, chief of operations at Geiger Crisis Center, said Voices had high praise for Hohl.

“We’ve worked with Voices for years, and I think she’s just the perfect person to lead it,” said Dunne. “We haven’t rehired yet because we haven’t found anyone nearly as talented. But if we had to lose her to any organization, I’m glad that she’s there. I know she’ll do great work for that community.”

While Hohl was working at the Newburyport agency, she was an avid volunteer for Voices of Violence in her spare time. When the director position was posted, she went for it.

“I thought that the opportunity to do this work in my backyard, I just couldn’t it pass up,” she said.

She’s amazed at the life-saving work her organization does on daily basis, but the demand outstretches the resources.

“One of the most difficult parts of this job is the unmet need,” she said. “We meet that need in the best way we can right now, and yet so much of it goes undone.”

About 800 domestic and sexual abuse victims seek help from Voices Against Violence every year. Staff members and volunteers also answer more than 1,000 hotline calls annually, and their 6-family emergency shelter is full every night of the week.

Voices Against Violence serves 12 towns and cities in the Greater Framingham area. Hohl said she sees clients from every community in their coverage area. Many people do not realize the prevalence of domestic violence and domestic abuse in their communities, she said.

One in three women, and one in nine men, will experience domestic abuse. “We know that to be a very real statistic,” Hohl said.

She has also seen a troubling trend emerge since the crackdown on undocumented immigrants began earlier this year.

There is hesitancy on the part of immigrants to reach out for help, she said, because they are too scared to do so. So extra effort to assist those in need is required. Half the battle, she said, is getting people, especially immigrants, to understand exactly what Voices Against Violence does, and that all their services are confidential and free.

“Our work tends to be a bit mysterious. I think a lot of people really don’t understand what we do. What does it mean that we’re empowering survivors? It’s complicated work; we see it all here.”

Scott Calzolaio can be reached at 508-734-0389, or by email at scalzolaio@wickedlocal.com