Domestic violence victims, advocates call for change

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Tina Davis Thompson, a survivor of a domestic violence attack, speaks to a crowd on Stop Violence Against Women day at the Capitol on Feb. 4.

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ATLANTA — Janet Paulson gave police photos of the 74 firearms her husband kept in their home after he said he was going to kill her.

Police took all but one gun — a Smith and Wesson 9mm he kept in his car — a weapon authorities said they couldn’t seize.

Paulson’s husband shot her six times with that same firearm six days later in November 2015.

For Tina Davis Thomason, it took just minutes for seven shots from a 40-caliber pistol in February 2018 to change her life. Davis was shot in her Ball Ground home by her estranged husband.

“In the course of about five minutes, life as I knew it, life as I loved it, changed forever,” she said.

At the Central Presbyterian Church Tuesday, the two women and other advocates and victims of family violence geared up to make the trip across the street to the Capitol to lobby for domestic violence-related legislation on Stop Violence Against Women Day.

“This is a public safety issue,” Paulson said. “Our whole community was affected. This affects neighbors, communities, schools, police officers.”

Advocates and their lawmaker allies have long pushed stricter firearm restrictions for family violence abusers and other legislative changes.

This session, they’re advocating for a bill to end the statute of limitations for rape and other aggravated sexual crimes and continue pushing for firearms to be taken out of the hands of individuals convicted of misdemeanor crimes of family violence.

Rep. Mandi Ballinger, R-Canton, advocates for domestic violence legislation in the House, where big wins include victims being able to change their name under seal and break an apartment lease. Strangulation is now considered an aggravated assault, a felony charge.

This session, Ballinger is looking to strike current broad definitions of domestic violence that could include anyone living together in a household regardless of intimate relationship and add a definition for “intimate partner violence” and “family violence.”

These same definition problems, she said, hold up legislation such as Senate Bill 150 — which aims to take firearms away from domestic abusers.
Federal law — narrow in language — prohibits individuals convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence charges from owning a firearm.

“Georgia does not comply,” Paulson said, “all our surrounding states do.”

Paulson said her medical bills alone are $1.5 million. Not taking action to remove firearms from domestic violence abusers is costing insurers, she said.

Legislation known as Senate Bill 287, sponsored by Harold Jones, D-Augusta, would allow an individual to be prosecuted for rape, aggravated sodomy or aggravated battery with no time limit from when it took place.

The current statute of limitations for rape convictions in Georgia is 15 years.

But in a state that values Second Amendment rights, advocating for measures that limit access to firearms is a challenge when working the ropes at the Capitol.

“What you’re going to hear when you go across the street, some of you representatives are going to say ‘I don’t like that bill because it eliminates due process,’” Paulson told volunteers. “Here’s what I have to say to that: if you’re dangerous enough to have a protective order issued by a judge, there’s your due process.”

Putting a face to the issues is the most powerful thing volunteers can do to curb family violence, according to members of advocacy groups.

“We have all these scary statistics out there, about domestic violence,” Ballinger said, “but that's really not going to help anybody until they can really put a face with that.”

**Federal dollars stalled, state dollars saved**

Many government programs are on the chopping block with the governor’s mandated 4% and 6% state agency budget cuts — but advocates are thankful that domestic violence services aren't among them.

There were no budget cuts to the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council family violence funding that sends dollars to domestic violence shelters and sexual assault centers.
“Recommendations were made to cut money to domestic violence programs,” Shenna Morris, director of policy and community engagement for the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said, “but for the governor’s budget proposal that was not one of his priorities to cut those funds. We’re really grateful for that because there’s still such a great need.”

In Fiscal Year 2019, more than 4,000 victims and their children were turned away from domestic violence shelters due to a lack of bed space, according to the Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council.

State funding is especially crucial now, they said, with the federal funding up in the air.

Paulson read a quote from Gov. Brian Kemp to the crowd before they took to the halls of the Capitol.

“All life has value, all life matters and all life is worthy of protection,” Kemp said when signing the "heartbeat" bill last session. “I’m signing this bill to ensure all Georgians have the opportunity to live, grow, learn and prosper in the great state of Georgia.”

“I have a heartbeat,” Paulson said.