



Michael Cassell / The Middletown Press
 U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman meets, left to right, with Jaci McDaniel-White, director of New Horizons, a battered women's shelter in Middletown, and Margaret Flinter, vice president of the Community Health Center.

Lieberman tours women's center

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MIDDLETOWN — Violence against women is growing more deadly due to drugs like crack and the statewide network of gangs, a small group of local women's advocates told U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman at a meeting Thursday.

"It's changing," Community Health Center Women's Advocate Michelle Walder told the senator. "It's getting more serious. The violence is greater because we are seeing gangs coming into it."

In fact, not only do gangs cause problems for individual women, but they also cause problems for the shelters that service them, the group said. When a shelter houses a

woman whose abuser is a gang member, the group said, it can put the entire operation at risk. Because of this, shelter operators must often find alternate housing for gang-related abuse cases.

Lieberman listened to the women, asked questions, and said this was the first he had heard of the gang problem as it relates to violence against women.

Lieberman met with the group to discuss the Domestic Violence Act that Congress is currently considering. While he started the day at the meeting in Middletown, an all-day series of meetings on the topic took him to Enfield, Vernon and Willimantic as well.

The group also told the senator that current drugs-of-choice are in-

creasing the seriousness of crimes against women because they are apt to make abusers more violent.

But a self-described battered woman who attended the meeting said it's not just drug-induced violence that some women have to contend with.

"You have no control," the woman who called herself Jill said. "It's not just the high, it's the emotional and physical abuse that goes along with getting the drugs."

Meanwhile, New Horizons Director Jaci McDaniel-White said the news media is partly to blame for the gang problem. New Horizons is located in the city and is an 11-bed, year-round, 24-hour a day shelter for battered women. McDaniel-White

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 said the media has glamorized gang-related violence.

"It's a family," McDaniel-White told Lieberman about gangs. "These young people won't take no for an answer. I think the news media perpetuates that."

The Domestic Violence Act is part of the crime bill which is pending in congress. Among other things, the

act would make court-ordered protective orders enforceable in more than one state.

Because there is often a myriad of interpretations of domestic violence laws on the local level, there was some discussion at the round-table type meeting about the effectiveness of state and federal efforts in ending domestic violence.

"All men know a restrictive order

is just a piece of paper," McDaniel-White said. "It's only as good as the police department that enforces it."

As a battered woman, Jill said that she had been afraid and intimidated into not calling the police in the past, but she has very little hesitation if her abuser were to harass her in the future.

"I really feel like if I don't stand up to him and hope that the system

backs me up and protects me, I'll never accomplish anything," she said.

The bill also has provisions that would earmark federal dollars to fight violence against women.

"Hopefully we can get it passed and get it going," Lieberman said. "I want to work with you to make sure that Connecticut gets our share of the money."

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