

Report in Brief

Date: April 2022

Report No. A-09-21-06000

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL



Why OIG Did This Audit

The COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) has posed special challenges for victims of domestic violence. Government agencies implemented extensive community mitigation activities, including issuing shelter-in place orders. Because of economic and other uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and shelter-in-place orders, victims may have been less likely to use crisis hotlines because their abusers were close by. The National Domestic Violence Hotline (the Hotline) provides life-saving resources and safety planning services for victims of domestic violence.

Our objectives were to: (1) identify trends in the Hotline's contact data before and during the pandemic and (2) identify challenges that the Hotline faced during the pandemic and actions that it took to address those challenges while continuing to support those affected by domestic violence.

How OIG Did This Audit

We obtained the Hotline's contact data for March 19, 2019, through March 18, 2021, and analyzed the following: contact volume and communication methods; demographic information (ethnicity, age group, and gender); situational information (abuse types, contact needs, barriers in service, and contact type); and referral information. We also obtained the Hotline's feedback on our analysis. We interviewed Hotline officials to identify challenges the Hotline faced during the pandemic and actions it took to address them.

National Snapshot of Trends in the National Domestic Violence Hotline's Contact Data Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

What OIG Found

Although our analysis showed little change in total contact volume from the period before to the period during the pandemic, we identified notable changes in the contact data for some subcategories of data that we analyzed. For example, the number of contacts that used online chat to contact the Hotline increased by 19 percent, the number of contacts that identified with the Asian ethnicity group increased by 24 percent, and the need for protective/restraining order assistance increased by 40 percent. Furthermore, our analysis showed notable fluctuations in the number of contacts for some subcategories of data in certain months during the pandemic. Although the Hotline provided explanations for what could have contributed to these fluctuations, it could not determine whether they were a result of the pandemic. The Hotline believed that the full impact of the pandemic may not be reflected in the contact data until more time has passed.

The Hotline identified four challenges that it faced during the pandemic: (1) connecting victims to providers and resources that were operating at a limited capacity because of the pandemic, (2) tracking the unique impact of the pandemic on victims to better serve contacts' needs, (3) addressing a decrease in contact volume from victims who may have needed help but did not contact the Hotline because they were in closer proximity to their abusers as a result of shelter-in-place orders, and (4) fostering meaningful connections among Hotline staff to carry its mission forward. To address these challenges, the Hotline took actions to help ensure that it continued to support those affected by domestic violence.

What OIG Recommends

This report includes no recommendations. However, considering the information in this report may help the Hotline evaluate its emergency response to identify areas in which it can improve and to ensure that it addresses any long-term effects of the pandemic.