

Nebraska teens are urged to learn how to safely step up and speak out against dating violence during Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October, said Thomas Pristow, director of the Division of Children and Family Services in the Department of Health and Human Services.

DHHS is joining the state's 21 local domestic violence and sexual assault programs and the Nebraska Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Coalition to provide information to teens about steps they can take in potentially violent situations, he said. Information is online at www.stepupSpeakout.org.

"Violence often begins at a young age and prevention efforts should start early by building healthy and respectful relationships in all peer, dating and family relationships," Pristow said. "So, in addition to speaking up against abuse, we also need to speak up for attitudes and behaviors that are examples of healthy relationships."

Pristow estimated 435,000 women and men in Nebraska have experienced violence, rape or stalking. Social change starts with every Nebraskan noticing degrading, intimidating or threatening actions, and speaking out against abusive attitudes and behaviors.

The most-recent statistics point out the problem. According to a report issued in November 2011 by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- About one in five women and one in 71 men have been raped.
 - Nearly 80 percent of women experienced their first rape before 25 years of age, with 42 percent experiencing their first rape before the age of 18.
 - More than one-quarter of male victims experienced their first rape when they were 10 years of age or younger. Estimates for other male ages were based on numbers too small to calculate a reliable percentage.
 - Men and women who experienced rape were more likely to report frequent headaches, chronic pain, difficulty sleeping, activity limitations, poor physical health and poor mental health.
- "Children and young adults learn how to form positive relationships while growing up," Pristow said. "That's why it's important to exemplify and talk to them about healthy relationships to prevent the establishment of patterns of dating violence that can last into adulthood."