

# In Their Shoes

by Kevin Robinson-Avila

*Victor La Cerva silenced a room full of legislators and government officials with four pairs of shoes.*

The footwear, taken from victims of domestic violence, included the shoes of two small boys who were shot to death, boots from a teenage girl who committed suicide, and sneakers from a 17-year-old who killed another boy with a gun that he bought to shoot his abusive stepfather.

"These shoes make it all very real," explained La Cerva, medical director of the New Mexico Department of Health's Family Health Bureau. "Domestic violence is having a chilling impact on the children of this state."

La Cerva was one of three presenters at a workshop Feb. 2 in Santa Fe on family violence and children. Thirteen state legislators and about a dozen representatives of cabinet-level departments and state agencies attended.

Organized by NMSU, the workshop was the first in a series of planned "Family Impact Seminars" to educate lawmakers and government officials about the effect state policies have on New Mexico families. The seminars during the legisla-

tive session cover the pros and cons of state policies from a family perspective, says Bruce Jacobs, a health specialist with NMSU's Extension home economics department.

"We want to provide unbiased, research-based information to legislators and high-ranking executive officials about laws and practices that have the most potential to help fam-

ilies," Jacobs says. "We chose family violence for the first topic because it's an urgent issue that is very much on the legislative agenda."

At the workshop, La Cerva said domestic violence is crippling the future of thousands of children in New Mexico. The state ranks third in the nation for domestic homicides, and children are direct wit-



A chilling reminder: Victor La Cerva, medical director of the New Mexico Department of Health's Family Health Bureau, retains the shoes of four young victims of domestic violence to remind himself and others of the devastating impact family violence has on children.

nesses to 50 percent of the murders.

“One-half of all alcohol and drug abuse in our society can be traced back to adverse childhood experiences,” La Cerva says. “Children as young as 3 in New Mexico are being diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder.”

Sara Buel, a University of Texas law professor, discussed ways to improve prosecution rates and protect victims, such as lengthening the time allowed to try cases from six to 12 months to avoid dismissals, prosecuting abusers based on evidence rather than victim testimony and mandating arrests when there is clear evidence of abuse.

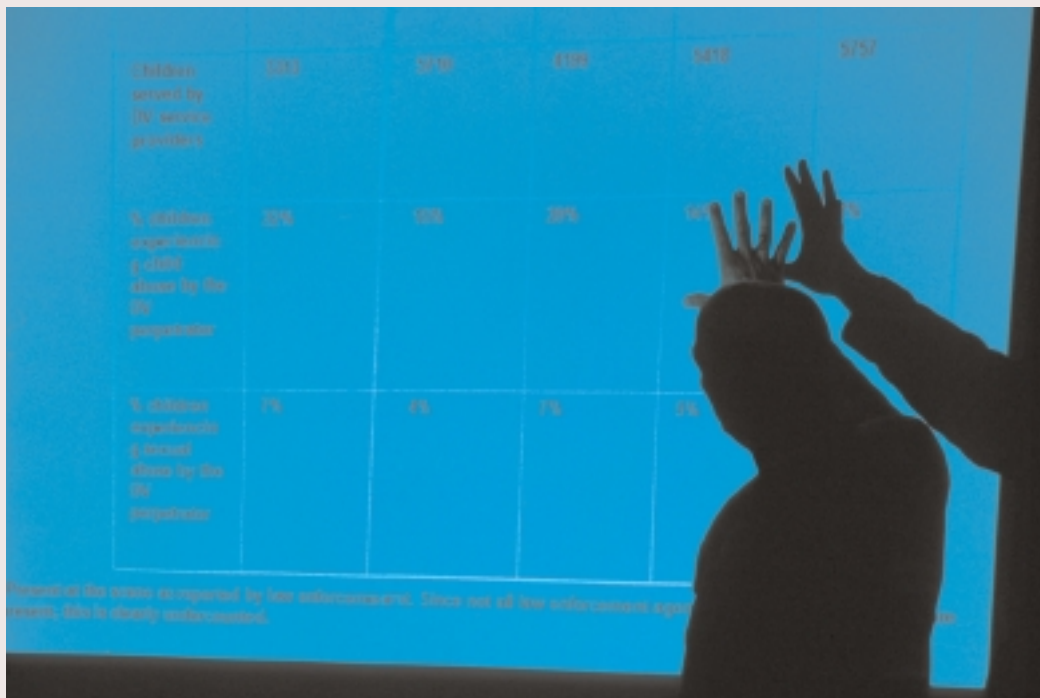
Stephanie Walton of the National Conference of State Legislatures talked about laws in other states that have reduced domestic violence.

The seminar made an impression on policymakers. Sen. Steve Komadina (R-Corrales) introduced a joint Senate memorial requesting that the state Health, and Children, Youth and Families departments study policies to improve services and treatment for children exposed to domestic violence and recommend changes in criminal and child welfare laws.

“It was an extremely informative workshop,” Komadina says. “These seminars should become one of those annual ‘don’t-miss events’ for legislators.”

Rep. Mary Helen Garcia (D-Las Cruces) says she will plan a summit on domestic violence in Doña Ana County as a result of the seminar. “It gave such good, basic information to help us create sound policies.”

The event included a separate roundtable discussion Feb. 3 for cabinet officials and state agency representatives, says Charollette Collins, an Extension specialist and coordinator for the seminars. “They discussed ways to tighten intera-




Painful statistics: Family Impact Seminar presenters highlighted the fact that 35 New Mexicans died in 2004 in domestic violence-related incidents, a 60 percent increase from 2003. The state ranks third in the nation for domestic homicides, and children are direct witnesses to 50 percent of the murders.

gency collaboration.”

The seminars are modeled on the University of Wisconsin’s Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars, which has offered workshops to policy-makers since 1989. Ann Vail, head of NMSU’s family and consumer sciences and Extension home economics departments, asked her staff to recreate the seminars in New Mexico.

“Lawmakers routinely examine the environmental, economic and community impact of policies, but the whole notion of family impact is new,” Vail says.

Future seminars could cover Medicaid, drunken driving laws and pre-kindergarten and after-school programs.

“We should consider family impact in all areas of policy making, even gambling and water policies,” Vail says. “We want this to be as common as environmental impact statements.” 



Legal advice: To better protect victims of domestic violence, law professor Sara Buel advised New Mexico legislators to amend laws to make it easier to prosecute abusers.