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Government has a role in ending domestic abuse

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It is a sad fact that every day in Miami-Dade County — and for that matter, across the United States — our neighbors are assaulted, stalked and sexually abused. Far too often, the victims are trapped and have no way out.

Last year, 9,313 domestic violence offenses were reported to the police in Miami-Dade County, more than in any other county in Florida. Yet only half of those offenses ended in arrests. The glass is half empty, every day.

Also last year, Miami-Dade shelters provided overnight protection to victims fleeing domestic violence on 23,276 occasions, but that is always merely a short-term solution. Domestic violence disproportionately affects women, particularly women of color, women with disabilities and women who have low income.

Beyond those groups, domestic violence affects people from all walks of life. Prior to the tragic events that led to her death, Danette Willory was a law student and intern at the Broward State Attorney's Office and had hopes of becoming a prosecutor. This spring, she bled to death from close-range gunshot wounds in a car outside her apartment after a dispute with her boyfriend. Danette's mother insisted that the man had never previously shown signs of being violent. "He was extremely quiet," she later noted.

Domestic violence has typically been seen as a "private" matter between victims and their abusers. Such situations, the thinking goes, occur — and remain — behind closed doors.

The issue is not just how we think about the problem, but also how our society's institutions react. In 1999, a Colorado woman's three young children were brutally murdered after the police failed to enforce a restraining order against her husband. Instead of looking for the man and the kidnapped girls, the officers took a two-hour dinner break, wrote a ticket to someone who had violated a fire-lane regulation and filled out a report about a lost dog.

Like many victims, that woman had no recourse. The Supreme Court eventually ruled, a terrifying precedent that still holds today, that there was no violation of the U.S. Constitution in the police's failure to enforce the restraining order against her husband.

To this day, that reality holds true for many victims in Miami-Dade County — even for those who have valid, court-ordered restraining orders against their abusers.

It's time we turn that way of thinking into a relic of our past.

The American people, and the residents of Miami-Dade County, deserve better than a half-empty glass. That's why we worked together to draft and introduce a resolution — approved unanimously by the Miami-Dade County Commission on July 17 — declaring that freedom from domestic violence is "a fundamental human right." The resolution not only assures the residents of Miami-Dade County that every man, woman and child shares the right to be free from domestic violence, but also directs all local government agencies

to incorporate that principle into their policies and practices.

In taking this important step, Miami-Dade County becomes the first county in the nation to recognize our government's duty to stand up for those who are abused behind closed doors. Passing the resolution was the first step in opening those doors and helping thousands of victims live without such brutality — and for those who seek to escape it, a future without dead ends.

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