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With Alumna as Lead, Silent Witness Initiative Launches Tool to Provide Better Access to Domestic Violence Data

To mark the database’s unveiling, University’s student chapter to hold vigil and campus march honoring domestic violence victims

BRISTOL, R.I. – To help prevent and decrease the number of domestic violence incidents – which in 2012 totaled approximately 810,790 cases and claimed the lives of nearly 1,300 men and women in the U.S. – leaders from the Silent Witness Initiative have collaborated with Roger Williams University to launch a comprehensive online database that makes domestic violence case data more easily accessible, intelligible and organized. The new tool will be formally unveiled on Wednesday, Oct. 1, at a candlelight vigil and march on the Roger Williams campus, featuring RWU students, faculty and staff, other Silent Witness college chapters, as well as friends and family members of domestic violence victims.

Spearheaded by the Silent Witness Initiative and created by Roger Williams University alumna Nicole Nelson ’13 as part of her graduate work at Smith College, the online repository catalogs 20 years of FBI case information on domestic violence and intimate partner violence incidents. The data is organized
by state and year but also in categories such as victim’s gender and relationship to perpetrator. While the platform will be showcased at the campus event, users will be able to access the information via the Silent Witness Initiative homepage at www.silentwitness.net starting on Oct. 2.

“Whether it’s a parent of a victim or an advocate volunteering with a domestic violence prevention group, individuals were finding very little reliable, easy-to-understand data around the prevalence of domestic violence in their city or in the U.S. at large,” says Jennifer Stanley, director of residence life and the Women’s Center at Roger Williams University and a board member for the Silent Witness Initiative.

“By collecting critical information surrounding domestic violence abuse and homicides in one accessible online platform, our hope is that we can better inform the public but also initiate a call to action that more has to be done to address the physical violence and abuse happening among couples and families today.”

With a central platform that clearly communicates the case data, domestic violence prevention nonprofits and advocacy groups can now access the statistics surrounding the severity of domestic violence in their state, which is particularly useful in applying for funding or engaging local government agencies in creating more support programming for victims and families. The data may also inform public policy discourse and educate criminal justice professionals who counsel domestic violence survivors.

“Our research compiles more than 20 years of statistics,” Nelson says. “While the data shows an overall downward trend in domestic violence homicides for both men and women, the numbers are still alarming. Sifting through the data was a powerful exercise – at first glance, the information looks purely like hard numbers and figures, but in reality, these data points represent people’s lives. I hope more people take the time to realize the full severity of how prevalent domestic violence really is in our homes today.”

Rhode Island ranks in the middle third of states for annual homicide deaths of women by intimate partners. The March to End the Silence on the Roger Williams University campus will honor these victims’ lives by creating an exhibit of dozens of red, life-size silhouettes that represent the victims by bearing their names and stories. While this is the 12th year the RWU Silent Witness chapter has organized the annual march, other local college chapters including Johnson & Wales University, Providence College and the University of Rhode Island are planning to participate. The event will also include the presentation of the annual Community of Peace Award, which this year recognizes Mari Dias, a professor of counseling psychology at Johnson & Wales for her work as a domestic violence counselor.

The Silent Witness Initiative is an international organization that honors and remembers the women, men and children murdered each year in acts of domestic violence. Begun in 1997 in response to a call to give domestic violence murder victims a voice, all 50 states and 23 countries have created Silent
Witness exhibits. Each display shares the individual stories of those who can no longer speak out and honors their memories. The Silent Witnesses of Rhode Island is organized by the Rhode Island Crisis Assistance Center.

Roger Williams University has led a Silent Witness campus chapter organized by the RWU Women’s Center since 2002. In addition to the annual vigil and march, students incorporate the Silent Witness silhouettes at campus events, including the crime prevention fair and Valentine’s Day activities, to help create further awareness on domestic violence and sexual assault issues among the student community.