

CULTURE

# “Signal for Help” Is a New Tool for Abuse Victims During the Coronavirus Lockdown and Beyond

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Photo: Courtesy of Women's Funding Network

*Every week, Vogue will be spotlighting the medical workers, teachers, and Good Samaritans who are giving back to those in need during the coronavirus crisis.*

For millions of people around the world, sheltering in place during the coronavirus pandemic is not only unsafe, it's terrifying. The lockdowns have confined many to abusive homes and abusive partners. People are being surveilled by their partners, denied basic supplies and sustenance, and being abused, psychologically and physically, often in front of children. Like all shelters at the moment, those that cater to domestic abuse victims pose a threat of community spread and, in light of the COVID-19 crisis and stay-at-home orders, survivors have nowhere to go. On average, 24 people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by a partner in the United States, 12 million men and women over the course of a year. In the last two months, these cases have increased significantly. In California, for example, domestic abuse calls to the Fresno sheriff's office increased by more than 70%; in San Antonio, Texas, there was a 21% increase in family violence calls, with more than 500 additional calls during the first three weeks in March compared to the same period last year.

Much of these calls for help go unreported because speaking out can be a dangerous situation for survivors in and of itself. Today, however, the Women's Funding Network, the largest philanthropic network in the world dedicated to girls and women, is launching an important campaign that will hopefully serve as a lifeline for domestic abuse survivors around the country during coronavirus and beyond.

“Signal for Help,” or “#SignalForHelp,” is a one-handed gesture that women and children (and men as well) can use on a video call or in person to communicate that they feel threatened. The movement involves facing your palm to the camera or person, tucking your thumb into your palm and folding your four fingers over the top of your thumb. It is an alternative to calling 911 and sends a signal to anyone—the police, a family member, a friend—to “please reach out to me safely,” so that the victim can respond via text or email or in a call away from the abuser and provide information to get help. As the Network's president and CEO Elizabeth Barajas-Román explains, now more than ever is the right time to promote this signal: “You have people stuck at home and maybe also someone who is sick with the virus. There are also mounting financial pressures and the general stresses of a pandemic. This all just

adds to the escalation, and we really saw a need to start thinking about new tools that abuse victims can use.”

Barajas-Román says that the Women’s Funding Network is working closely with its offices and members in almost every state in order to ensure that the women reaching out for help have connections to community shelters and other support services. They’re putting together kits for their Network members to put on their websites, and guides for women to learn about how to get help outside of the hand gesture. “It’s important for women who see the symbol to know what to do,” Barajas-Román says. “That’s where our members come in. It’s not just about calling 911—it’s a complicated issue.” Part of this campaign is also about teaching those on the other end of a call for help on what questions to ask. For example, they should ask simple yes or no questions to keep things discreet, as well as questions like: “Do you want me to reach out to you directly?” And: “Can I check in with you?”

Barajas-Román says that they’re also working with large-scale companies like Salesforce and Facebook in order to spread awareness around the #SignalForHelp campaign. “This symbol is really a way to say ‘I see you, I’m going to help you,’” Barajas-Román says. “It’s really important that we get this message out not only around the symbol, but we want everyone to understand how they can be of help if they see it.” The Women’s Funding Network began testing the symbol about a week ago in Canada, and Barajas-Román says they have already seen some positive results in terms of getting women out of abusive homes and into safe spaces. They’re also working with RAINN and Futures Without Violence and are in consultation with other national advocacy and direct-service providers to track some of the data around the success of the symbol, which the organization says is something universal that they can put in the hands of people regardless of age, language, and culture. Says Barajas-Román, “People have responded and said that this was a tool they were looking for and that it was desperately needed.”

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**Topics** Heroes and Heroines

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