Guest opinion

Media is biased place for trial

This month Dan Bray took allegations about the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP) to the media. In the light of the media coverage, many citizens who have for years supported the DVIP may question that support. That result would be a tragedy, because Bray's allegations can never be fully answered in the press and on television. Yet letting these important matters go unchallenged would compound an injustice.

Bray is a lawyer with a long and distinguished record in family and juvenile law served in the private and public sectors. Surely he must have considered that a "public dialogue" around these allegations can never be balanced.

All of the allegations are based on the affidavit of one woman. The media have stated that this affidavit is "filed," despite the fact that, according to Bray's own representations, no lawsuit is pending or anticipated. If the affiant were testifying in court, unlike before cameras, she would be subject to cross examination about her allegations. Her memory about two-year-old conversations would be challenged. Her bias and prejudice, such as her admission that she is partly motivated by having lost out on a DVIP job, would be fully developed. These devices for finding the truth are not available in a "trial" in the media.

Bray provided legal representation in Iowa City for the husband of the DVIP employee who was arrested. From that client relationship, he surely knows about the criminal and civil action she faces in the Arkansas courts. Any public statements about these matters would jeopardize her ability to defend herself there. Some of the issues raised involve personal matters, another subject which should not be discussed in public. Furthermore, domestic violence counselors are obligated to honor confidentiality with their clients.

All of these factors, and others, make bringing the full story before the public impossible. The tragic consequence is that untested allegations are left in the public eye, leaving the public to question the DVIP.

In spite of Bray's stated intention not to "bring down" the DVIP, I cannot but think that he has, perhaps unknowingly, played into a disturbing journalistic trend.

Susan Faludi's recent book Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women carefully documents the media's subtle sabotage of the women's movement. That Faludi herself is a journalist heightens the impact of her work.

Under Faludi's thesis, any bare allegation that the DVIP is part of a "nationwide network of women's shelters" which "hide children" would grab front page headlines and television news programs' lead stories. This would be true no matter how unsubstantiated the claim.

I readily admit my own bias in this matter. For 14 years I have watched the Domestic Violence Intervention Program help women and children cope with beatings and abuse at the hands of their partners and fathers. I have watched Pat Meyer, the director, tirelessly work 70 hours a week in her efforts to bring safety to almost 8,000 women and more than 2,000 children during her 11 years of service to the program. Watching the public attack on both Pat and the DVIP, while knowing that a fair defense in the media is impossible, frustrates and pains me deeply.

Don't misconstrue my point. I agree that any program which provides public service at public expense must be accountable to the public. The substance of the allegations should be considered by the DVIP, taking the time and effort necessary to examine them carefully. Public accountability is provided for in the Board of directors of programs, in the funding and accounting procedures they are required to follow, and by the voices of those that they set out to serve. It is not served by a media trial.

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