

Trains companies supporting those fleeing domestic abuse praised for help which could be the difference between life and death

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Train operating companies have been praised for offering free train travel to refuge accommodation for people fleeing domestic abuse during the coronavirus lockdown.

The partnership between train companies and Women's Aid was announced earlier this month in response to campaigners reporting an increase in domestic violence reports in the last few weeks.

Emma Rawlings, Chief Executive Officer at SWA Swindon Domestic Abuse Support Service, said the impact is huge and in some cases it will be the difference between life or death.

The support services has seen an 80% in requests to help victims from partner agencies such as the police, since the start of the lockdown last month, and a 25% increase in calls to the helpline from victims.

She said: "The impact is huge. It means that male and female victims, who would not normally be able to escape the abuse due to the financial restraints, and in many cases financial abuse, now have a lifeline. It means that they can get to a place of safety, they can escape the abuse, their children can be safe and they can get the support they need. It means they are free.

"Prior to the scheme being launched, we had a woman and her daughter in refuge and her determined perpetrator discovered their location. After two days of social services pondering over who would fund the train travel, we contacted Great Western Railway directly as we knew they were soon to launch their Rail to Refuge scheme.

"Within hours GWR had organised tickets for them to travel to a place of safety.

"Knowing the scheme was in place gave us the confidence that we would be able to find a place of safety

and get them moved quickly. When using the scheme it is discrete and the staff have been excellent in ensuring the women and their families are supported throughout their journey and made to feel safe.”

Prior to COVID-19, one in three women are reported to suffer from domestic abuse in their lifetime and two women in England are killed every year by their current or former partner. These figures are already on the increase.

Emma said: “We have used the scheme three times now here in Swindon. It was seamless and we had all the support that we could possibly want, especially from the staff at GWR.

“It gives us a tremendous sense of satisfaction knowing that we can offer the victims and their families a place in another town or city and that we no longer need to worry about funding for the travel.

“One such move was a victim needing to flee as a matter of urgency before the lockdown was imposed so that she was locked down in a much safer place.

“The Rail to Refuge scheme is an absolute lifeline for any victim of domestic abuse who cannot leave due to financial pressures or financial abuse and I would urge anyone suffering to use it.

“COVID-19 is not an excuse for domestic violence and does not mean that you cannot escape. It is very simple and straightforward and can be implemented at anytime from anywhere in the country. All you need to do is contact a domestic abuse charity and they will put things in place for you and your children.

“Please don’t suffer in silence.”

Photo credit: Great Western Railway