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Abused women no longer to be advised to leave home at once:

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SOCIAL WORKERS should not immediately encourage a woman to leave an abusive relationship in case it provokes a “catastrophic event”, according to a new Health Service Executive (HSE) guide.

The guidelines, which will be distributed to social workers and health professionals across the country today, have been drawn up in response to the growing awareness of the prevalence of domestic violence. The HSE says two out of every five social work and family support cases that it handles involve some element of domestic violence. It also estimates domestic abuse is present in about a fifth of Irish families.

The guidelines reflect growing concern about the dangers posed by abusers to their partners and children at the time when a woman leaves a relationship, and for the following six months.

Practice document on domestic violence – a guide for working with children and families urges social workers to reconsider how domestic abuse cases have been handled in the past. It advises social workers to listen to the wishes of the woman suffering the abuse rather than making quick judgments that could place her or her children in danger.

“Historically social work/care practice has focused on encouraging women to immediately leave a domestic violence situation in order to protect her children. Research now tells us that the point of leaving can be an extremely dangerous time for women, and therefore children ... Urging her to leave may precipitate a catastrophic event,” according to the new guidelines.

Social workers are advised to explore ways to help a woman to leave at a time when she is best prepared to do so in a way that is protective to herself and her children. “The woman is best placed to know when the time is right to act and we must show support, and trust her judgment of the situation,” concludes the new guide.

Kevin Webster, HSE community work team leader and co-author of the new guide, said some social workers already follow this practice but the guide would promote a more thorough approach across the country.

He said the guide had a particular focus on balancing domestic violence with child welfare and protection concerns. In a domestic violence situation protecting and supporting the woman is the most effective long-term way of protecting children, he said.

Women are at greater risk of suffering domestic violence when they are pregnant. One in eight women suffered abuse during pregnancy, according to a survey at the

Rotunda Hospital, while a British study found a quarter of woman who suffered domestic violence were assaulted for the first time while pregnant. On average a woman is assaulted 35 times before she makes a complaint to the Gardai, the guide says.

Since 1996, of 140 women murdered in the Republic, 87 of these women were killed in their own homes.