

<https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2024/10/09/iowa-domestic-violence-victim-leads-call-for-emergency-divorce-reforms/74815305007/>

She lived through hell. Can Iowan's call for emergency divorce reforms help other victims?

Lee Rood

Des Moines Register, October 9, 2024

- Battered for years by a husband who finally went to prison this year, Jordan Wulf filed for divorce in 2022 but doesn't have a hearing until next spring.
- Stuck with her husband's debts and a farm she can't yet sell, the Washington County domestic abuse survivor is leading a call for speedier emergency divorces.

KEOTA — The farm they bought together near this southeast Iowa town houses nothing now but nightmares. The broken furniture and holes in the walls are constant reminders of his rage.

In the kitchen, Christopher Wulf set a timer one day in October 2022 and told his wife, Jordan, she had 15 minutes to admit to past affairs that she says never happened — or die that very day. She began to hyperventilate as the clock ticked, and she insisted she was his "ride or die" to try to save her life. But she said he choked her anyway until she fell unconscious.

The next night, she said, he beat her on the front porch and tried to drag her out to the machine shed, an AR-15 rifle strung over his shoulder. She bought time, telling him she would admit to every gory detail so they could start over. But she told him she was exhausted and needed 15 minutes alone. He waited out in the machine shed while she went to the sink and poured a glass of water.

When she could see from a window that he wasn't looking, she managed to call 911. Holding the phone low, out of his eyesight, she told a dispatcher he was trying to kill her. Then she fled upstairs with her three boys until a fleet of law enforcement arrived.

The stories of rape, torture and abuse that Jordan Wulf, 42, eventually told therapists made them break down and cry. But after Christopher Wulf's sentencing this spring in Washington County for kidnapping with a dangerous weapon,

domestic abuse while impeding her airflow and willful injury, she felt she needed to do something more to help survivors like her heal and move on.

Inspiration came in the form of a [Change.org petition](#), started at the end of July, that pleaded for a law change in Iowa that would expedite divorces for victims of domestic violence. Other people quickly supported the idea, and with over 3,500 signatures of support, she is well on her way to reaching her goal of 5,000 in October, which is Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

From 2023:7 Des Moines metro women shot in 2 months: What is Iowa doing about domestic violence?

Christopher Wulf was sentenced to 25 years behind bars and is required to stay there for at least 17. Still, his wife said she can't help but feel like he still has control, that she is stuck with the house and the farm where he tortured her and with the mortgage and other bills. She and her boys can't move on until her divorce is final sometime next year.

“If some girl was taken by a stranger, would it be fair to make her live out the next two years of her life where all of that happened?” she asked. “I’m forced to sleep in a bed I shared with him. I can’t take out a loan to fix a house he destroyed. And I can’t sell it until I’m divorced.”

Not every law enforcement agency in Iowa reports Uniform Crime Data to Iowa's Department of Public Safety, but those that do reported eight domestic violence homicides last year, the most in the past five years.

Jordan Wulf's ordeal resonated with former state Rep. Jarad Klein, a former Public Safety Committee chair in the Iowa Legislature who is from Washington County and has known Jordan Wulf for years. A Republican lawmaker who served for 12 years before stepping down in 2023, Klein offered to help connect her with current lawmakers to see if a narrowly focused bill might be proposed in the next legislative session.

What she went through was so horrific, he said, "you wonder why this should even be a problem."

"The good thing is she's being vocal about it. And she's got a lot of support," he said. "I want to give legislators the chance to talk to the courts, prosecutors and people who specialize in divorce law," he said of her idea.

But while Wulf's idea appears a good one from 1,000 feet out, up close it's more complicated — especially when one considers that domestic violence is about power and control, legal experts told Watchdog. Pursuing an expedited divorce can mean that abuse victims forgo some of their legal rights. Yet in making reforms, legislators are obligated to preserve due process rights for abusers.

Criminal case delays divorce proceedings, but the bills keep coming

Wulf said she filed for divorce in December 2022, but she doesn't have a court hearing until March 2025. Part of the delay was because her attorney, Rachael Neff, advised her they needed to wait to finalize the divorce until after her husband was sentenced.

"We needed an outcome in his criminal case so that the court in the divorce proceeding could evaluate and determine a proper custody arrangement," Neff said.

Hearings and his criminal trial, originally scheduled for March 2023, were continued again and again as a result of motions by his attorney, Eric Tindal, court records show. Tindal did not respond to phone calls seeking comment on the case.

In early 2024, Christopher Wulf rejected a plea deal in his case, then he accepted one in the last week of March, just as he was finally scheduled to go to trial, court records show.

More Watchdog: [Why Iowa has become a dangerous place for youth in crisis and those trying to help](#)

Shortly after, Jordan Wulf and Neff prepared a divorce settlement proposal, and they sent it to Christopher Wulf's attorney on April 15. The attorney responded in June, after he was able to meet with his client in prison. Part of the settlement offer included a request to have Christopher Wulf's guns transferred to his father because Christopher Wulf can no longer own firearms.

For that reason and others, Jordan Wulf rejected the offer.

While Jordan Wulf waits until next spring for a judge to decide how best to dissolve the marriage, she said, she has been responsible for paying their mortgage and joint debt, and she cannot fully move on from the nightmare that became her life over 19 years of marriage.

"It's really, really expensive to live on this property. But the (divorce hearing) has been continuously ... pushed off," she said.

Iowans can get emergency divorces — but there are catches

Jordan Wulf — and other Iowans — do have the option of an emergency divorce, Watchdog learned.

A relatively new section of code in chapter [598.19](#), added by lawmakers in 2019, allows a party in a divorce to outline grounds for an emergency divorce and bypass the 90 days people are typically required to wait before a divorce is final.

"The court may in its discretion, on written motion supported by affidavit setting forth grounds of emergency or necessity and facts which satisfy the court that immediate action is warranted or required to protect the substantive rights or interests of any party or person who might be affected by the decree, hold a hearing and grant a decree dissolving the marriage prior to the expiration," the added section says.

But Kirsten Faisal, director of training and technical assistance for the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said she's not aware of emergency dissolutions

being used often in domestic violence situations. Those cases can be long and messy, especially when there are children, she said.

“Judges would be thrilled to get these cases done in just 90 days,” she said in an email. “It is (the abuser’s legal) tactics that drag the cases out, not the waiting period. Arguing over everything, using the children as a weapon, trying to drain the victim’s resources by making the case take as long as possible, using court appearances as an excuse to see/be with the victim.”

Faisal also said divorce doesn't end domestic violence for many survivors.

“Ending the relationship and ending the abuse are two separate issues. Things can become even more complicated when you are now trying to co-parent with an abusive ex. Also, separation escalates both the severity of abuse and the lethality,” she said.

Faisal said Jordan Wulf should be able to get an expedited divorce if she wants one under Iowa law, even if Christopher Wulf doesn’t.

“The law doesn’t say it would require the consent of both parties” for an emergency dissolution, she said. “The way I read it is that it is up to the judge’s discretion. ... This seems like the perfect kind of case to use that.”

Quicker resolution could lead to bad terms for abuse survivor, lawyer warns

But Alex Kornya, outgoing litigation director for Iowa Legal Aid, said contested issues often can make a divorce take much longer than 90 days, given trial scheduling and civil procedural deadlines.

"The problem with (Wulf's) case isn't the 90-day waiting period; it is overloaded dockets," he said. "Waiving the waiting period only makes sense if everyone is in agreement, which is pretty rare in a (domestic violence) situation."

"My gut also tells me that if there is a serious domestic violence situation and both sides are agreeing, what are the terms? Is the survivor getting screwed over? Is there some coercion involved in more favorable terms for an abuser? In some cases, yes, others, maybe no."

A lawyer will seek to provide the best information about risks and benefits, but in the end it's the client's decision, he said. "Clients may value severing that relationship, and understand what it means for their safety, over concerns."

However, bad terms can also have safety implications if they give an abuser continued control over the survivor in an enforceable court order, he said.

"For contested cases, you might need more than 90 days just to develop your case. Discovery can take months, and maybe an abuser might be at least somewhat more likely than others to withhold information or provide misleading information, given the common fixation on control. Maybe he controlled the finances during the marriage, or racked up a bunch of debt that she doesn't know about, etc."

He said an expedited divorce also could be used by an abuser to prevent a full investigation of finances and other details in the discovery process.

Anjie Schutts, a family law attorney for nearly 30 years in Des Moines, said Iowa's judges are overloaded and only have so much time.

She said she tells her clients emergency divorces typically can occur only if both clients can work out all the details. She also advises her clients to be careful about what they wish for and not to rush a divorce because financial disclosures take time, and they may lose out in the long run.

Neff said the two parties could settle before the divorce hearing next spring, but it has to go to trial if they can't.

Lethal threat grew over years of a violent marriage

Wulf said her husband's jealousy, possessiveness and controlling nature was evident even before they married at 19, but she was too young to realize it was a red flag. It escalated over their marriage.

She alleges he pushed her down a flight of stairs when she was pregnant with their second child. Later, she said, he started beating her with objects — broom handles, hammers, guns — and choked her many times.

In March 2022, Wulf's mother was so worried about her that she asked police to make a welfare check at the farm outside the hamlet of West Chester, near Keota. Wulf said she lied to police and said everything was fine, though she was being beaten routinely.

The events that led to her husband's arrest in October 2022 began 11 days before she made her furtive call to the police. He'd already alienated her from her family, she said, and she stopped going to work at a Coralville nursing home because he'd given her a black eye.

“At that point, it was just a matter of surviving and not allowing him to kill me,” she said.

The evening when he tried to drag her out to the machine shed with the gun, she said, she realized that if she didn't somehow stop him, she was going to die. She believes the 911 call saved her life.

Christopher Wulf fled before police arrived that night, and he called and texted her and their boys over and over. She managed to convince him to turn himself in two days later, promising they would face whatever criminal proceedings that followed together.

After he was jailed and Jordan Wulf had a restraining order, he still tried desperately to reach her through his mother, court records show. For that, he was also convicted for contempt of court.

In the victim impact statement that Jordan Wulf read at his sentencing, she finally told him her truth: That the thought of him hurting their children as badly as he had hurt her had consumed her — until it didn't anymore.

“The only other honest thing you ever uttered to me was when you said that no one would ever love me like you do,” she told him. “All I have to say to that is THANK GOD. I do not deserve that kind of 'love,' because it isn't love. I deserve respect, honesty, compassion and kindness.”

How to get help if you face domestic violence

About 41% of women and 26% of men have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime and reported a related impact, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Uniform Crime Report data collected by Iowa law enforcement agencies is incomplete; only 255 of 409 agencies that should report information submitted it to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report. Last year, however, at least eight domestic violence-related homicides were reported across the state, according to Iowa's Department of Public Safety. In 2022, there were three; in 2021 and 2020, four each; and in 2019, one.

Iowa has resources and advocates in every corner of the state.

If you or someone you know needs help, call the Iowa Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-770-1650.

Its website, survivorshelpline.org, includes safety tips and planning tools. It provides help to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, homicide, human trafficking and other violent crimes. It's staffed 24/7 and provides culturally specific services.

Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability from public officials, the justice system, businesses and nonprofits.

Reach her at lrood@registermedia.com, at 515-284-8549, on Twitter at [@leerood](https://twitter.com/leerood) or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/readerswatchdog](https://www.facebook.com/readerswatchdog).