A Multidisciplinary Approach to High Lethality Domestic Violence Cases

Submitted by DC SAFE

This proposal is submitted by DC SAFE for the 3rd Annual Criminology Conference to propose a panel discussion regarding the lessons learned and existing challenges in a multidisciplinary approach to high lethality domestic violence cases, specifically the DC SAFE-led High Risk Domestic Violence Initiative. Panel members will share the District of Columbia’s unique model for managing high risk domestic violence cases and discuss its evolution, successes and challenges over the past decade as well as possible avenues for future research.

The criminal justice system’s approach to domestic violence has made great strides in the last thirty years. Domestic violence is considered a crime and the state takes an interest in holding offenders accountable as a matter of public safety rather than mediating what used to be considered a private conflict. One of the most significant advancements in addressing domestic violence has been the lethality assessment or danger assessment developed by Dr. Jacqueline Campbell at Johns Hopkins University in 1998 which provided advocates with a statistically validated instrument to gauge how much danger a victim might be in and tailor a safety plan accordingly.¹ Since then, so-called High Risk Domestic Violence Initiatives and Lethality Assessment Projects have been implemented to identify the victims at highest risk of homicide at the hands of an intimate partner and provide an enhanced response to those cases.

The District of Columbia, in partnership with DC SAFE, implemented a High-Risk Domestic Violence Initiative in 2009 and it has made great strides since then to address potentially lethal intimate partner violence. The initiative consists of the Lethality Assessment Project that assesses each of the 8,000 cases per year that DC SAFE handles for risk of lethality and manages coordinated and enhanced services and information sharing among 18 city agencies and community-based organizations on a case-by-case basis, and the Domestic Violence Systems Review Team which oversees the Lethality Assessment Project and makes recommendations and policy and protocol changes at each of the partner agencies and organizations. The goal of the District’s HRDVI is to decrease the risk of homicide and serious

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re-assault due to intimate partner violence in the District by reducing barriers to services and resources for victims and providing a more coordinated approach to offender accountability.

Since 2009, DC SAFE has led this work in close partnership with the Metropolitan Police Department and the City Administrator’s Office and has taken the nationally recognized model for lethality assessment and high-risk domestic violence intervention teams and successfully tailored them to the unique needs of the District of Columbia’s population. The proposed panel discussion will focus on the following:

- The historical development of the multidisciplinary approach which includes law enforcement, probation and parole, pretrial services, and a host of social and supportive service agencies;
- The modifications to the national model that were needed to accommodate the needs of the District’s population and its status as a highly diverse urban area with a high rate of poverty and distrust of law enforcement;
- The successes of the project related to victim services and support and offender accountability;
- The successes and challenges inherent in a complex multidisciplinary approach;
- The challenges presented in shifting the focus from what the victim might need to free herself from the offender to what the criminal justice system can do to successfully restrain and hold accountable an individual who should be viewed as a serial and often escalating offender to prevent future violence;
- The public safety implications of gaining a true understanding of the criminal histories and behavior of domestic violence offenders and crafting a more appropriate criminal justice response; and
- The new phase the HRDVI is about to embark upon to use aggregate data to map intimate partner violence in the District and measure outcomes for survivors across the system of care and in the criminal justice system.

In addition to the lessons learned that can be useful to other large jurisdictions attempting the same work, the District’s High-Risk Domestic Violence Initiative is a work in progress that has enormous potential to impact public safety and health through its unique use of multidisciplinary collaboration and data sharing. DC SAFE appreciates the opportunity to submit this proposal and we hope to share our work with your membership on October 12, 2018.