



Criminal Justice Knowledge Bank

An initiative of the Division of Criminal Justice Services



Dutchess County: Lethality Assessment Program

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Summary:

Dutchess County's Lethality Assessment Program allows law enforcement personnel to identify individuals who are at great risk of serious injury or death due to domestic violence and connect them to services.

Problem

Domestic homicide is a devastating crime and its victims most frequently include intimate partners, in addition to children and other family members. Dutchess County experienced a drastic increase in domestic violence homicides from 2010 to 2013, as compared to previous years. During that four-year period, there were 14 domestic violence related deaths: nine intimate partners, four children and other family members, and one responding police officer.

Program Description

To address the rise in domestic violence related deaths, Dutchess County implemented the Lethality Assessment Program, developed by the Maryland Network to End Domestic Violence. The program identifies victims of domestic violence at risk of being seriously injured or killed by their abusers, and connects them to services. Law enforcement officials complete an 11-question screening tool at the scene of a domestic incident to identify high-risk victims and refer them to a domestic violence service provider directly following the incident. This instant connection with an advocate provides victims with immediate safety planning, assistance navigating the criminal justice system, and access to services, such as a 24-hour crisis hotline, court advocacy, and one-on-one counseling.

Police departments in Dutchess County train officers to initiate the Lethality Assessment screen after responding to calls for service involving current or former intimate partners, where there is the potential for danger, based on officers' expertise or experience. If the screening tool makes a "high danger" assessment, the

officer will advise the victim that they may be in immediate danger and that people in their situation have been killed. The officer requests that the victim speak with an advocate, and calls the domestic violence hotline. If the victim agrees, the officer remains with the victim while the advocate gathers pertinent information, provides immediate crisis intervention, assesses safety needs, and creates a plan for follow up after the officer leaves.

If a victim who is assessed as high danger declines to speak to an advocate, the officer will express concern for the victim's safety, provide contact information for the police, inform the victim about domestic violence services, and obtain permission for an advocate to follow up with the victim.

If the victim is not assessed as high danger, the officer will encourage the victim to contact domestic violence service providers, and provide the victim with police contact information.

Advocates are Family Services employees, a local non-profit, who are specially trained to provide follow up and comprehensive services to victims. In addition to immediate safety planning, advocates assist victims with referrals, crisis counseling, shelter placement, and other services following a police officer referral. Advocates also help victims navigate the criminal justice system, assisting with filing an order of protection, completing court paperwork, or filing a police report. Law enforcement also follow up with all victims deemed to be in high danger within 96 hours of the incident to assess their safety, ensure connection with services, and offer support.

An initiative of the state Division of Criminal Justice Services, the Knowledge Bank features summaries of promising local programs and practices and provides a platform for criminal justice practitioners to identify potential approaches to address their community's specific public safety issue.

Funding

The Lethality Assessment Program is funded by Dutchess County and the New York State Office of Victim Services.

Relevant Partnerships

The Universal Response to Domestic Violence Steering Committee, which oversees the Lethality Assessment Program, is comprised of leadership from agencies and systems that interact with victims or perpetrators of domestic violence. The Committee creates formal protocols among criminal justice, civil justice, law enforcement, and human service agencies that work with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. This team includes personnel from the Dutchess County Department of Behavioral and Community Health, District Attorney's Office, Office of Probation and Community Corrections, Department of Community and Family Services, Family Court, Integrated Domestic Violence Court, Sheriff's Office, service providers and local police departments. There are 17 police agencies within Dutchess County that use the screening tool.

Program Reviews or Evaluations

According to a five-year outcome report conducted by the Universal Response to Domestic Violence Steering Committee, police agencies in the county conducted 3,928 Lethality Assessment screens from May 2014 through June 2017. Victims in 49 percent of those assessments were identified as high danger and of those, 59 percent spoke with an advocate on the scene. Of the victims who spoke to an advocate on scene, 71 percent received additional services after the incident.

In 2021, Dutchess County reported that police agencies conducted a total 7,135 lethality screens between 2018 and 2020, averaging 2,378 Lethality Assessment screens per year during this period. Victims in 41 percent of those assessments were identified as being in high danger. Of the victims who spoke to an advocate on scene, an average of 69 percent received additional services after the incident.

According to data reported to the Division of Criminal Justice Services, during the six-year period from 2014 through 2019, there were five domestic homicides in the county: 4 involving intimate partners, and 1 involving other family member. This represented a 64 percent decrease compared to the four years prior to the implementation of the program.

Supportive Research

The Lethality Assessment Program model is based on a nationally recognized [evidence-based program](#) created by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence and the research of Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, a leader in the study of intimate partner homicides. Dr. Campbell developed a method called "[The Danger Assessment](#)", to measure the level of lethality for domestic violence victims by identifying risk factors for intimate partner homicide, which include stalking, threats with a weapon, increased or escalating violence, strangulation, forced sex, threats to kill, or recent separations. Her research also shows that 83 percent of victims, perpetrators, or both parties, have

contact with the criminal justice system, victim service programs, and/or health care agencies in the year prior to homicide, which makes this proactive intervention vital to the prevention of domestic violence homicides. The strategy uses proactive case management, offender management, and information sharing to prevent homicides.

Critical Success Factors

Collaboration among partners is key to enhance support for victims. Through the Universal Response to Domestic Violence Steering Committee, agencies combine resources, knowledge, and skills to best intervene in dangerous cases and interrupt the escalation of violence. When law enforcement and advocates work together, victims can be safer. Advocates can provide safety planning and help relocate victims, while the police can increase patrols around the residence, and probation can increase home visits to the offender if the individual is under supervision. Providing these wraparound services enhances the safety of the victim. When police and advocates work in silos and do not share critical information, victims can fall through the cracks.

Finding time and money for training officers was challenging, but necessary. Family Services and the Sheriff's Office trained each department based on their needs. If a department did not have training funds, staff trained officers individually. Other departments trained officers through in-service, other annual training, or refresher trainings. Lethality Assessment Training is integrated into the training curriculum that all incoming officers in Dutchess County must successfully complete.

Lessons Learned

Creating positive working relationships between law enforcement and victim advocates required a culture change, but was necessary to improve victim trust in the system. Buy-in from the top down helped overcome existing stereotypes and create a positive working relationship among agencies.

Additional Comments

- Family Services and the Sheriff's Office worked with interested fire departments in Dutchess County starting in 2018 to train fire fighters and emergency medical technicians in administering the assessment. Typically, if other first responders answer a call, they respond with the police. In these situations, the victim has the option to speak with the first responder they feel most comfortable with. The completed assessment screens reported above, include any Lethality Assessment screens conducted by other first responders.
- Although the number of assessments completed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 remained stable, Dutchess County reports that the severity and complexity of domestic violence calls increased during 2020, including the challenges for victims finding support and safety. The Lethality Assessment Program became a critical factor in connecting individuals who were further isolated with lifesaving services.

Submit a Program to the Knowledge Bank

Has your agency implemented a program or practice that has addressed a public safety issue?

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