

# *Vermont Guardian*

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## **DV in 3-D: Coordinating a Community Response**

*Editor's note: The Vermont Guardian is examining the complex nature of domestic abuse that often occurs in homes, but is hardly contained by their walls. This week, we examine how communities and businesses are responding to domestic violence.*

By S.A. Troy | Special to the Vermont Guardian

It's a beautiful, sunny Vermont day in May. The last vestiges of winter have faded and in their place daffodils and shoots of grass carpet the earth. Most are drunk on spring, including the birds that flit carelessly by, as the winter's dearth has been supplanted by abundance.

On such a day, it is impossible to imagine what it must be like for someone to leave the person they've loved and lived with for years, who has, in between times of great joy and passion, abused them — psychologically, emotionally, and perhaps even physically.

What a leap it must require, to put one's faith in the community-at-large to help them and their children start over again, often without money, without love, and without understanding.

According to Judy Rex, executive director of the Vermont Center for Crime Victims Services, a victim of domestic violence (DV) who does not have enormous resources will connect with almost every social service society provides. These may include, but are not limited to, law enforcement, health care, family court for filing a Relief from Abuse Order, the state's attorney's office if there are grounds for a criminal case, Vermont Legal Aid for divorce and custody assistance, district court if a criminal case proceeds, victim services such as shelters and compensation funds, mental health services, housing, childcare, and state and federal public assistance for families, all the while confronting the reality that the risk to a victim of DV is highest during and after separation.

Because victims/survivors of DV come in contact with multiple services, Jill Richard, economic justice projects coordinator for the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (the Network), said that without coordination between agencies, often the work of one system undermines the work of another. The goal of coordinated community response (CCR) then is to make sure that the services a survivor receives are informed and supported by each other.

This is not a new concept, nor is it specific to DV. Anyone with a need that requires interacting with multiple service agencies, such as a person with disabilities, benefits by receiving coordinated services.

As it applies to DV, the concept originated in the joint response that began in earnest in the 1980s from police and prosecutors. But according to Sarah Kenney, public policy coordinator for the Network, CCR's scope in recent years has broadened to include issues of economic opportunity as well as general community response.

"We've come a long way with systems, but systems only go so far; the community has to fill in those gaps. The longer I do this job, the more I realize how hard it is to make significant change without doing significant community education. We have to think about the way all of our systems and communities respond to survivors and batterers," said Kenney.

### **Response in Action**

For a small state, Vermont has many ambitious examples of CCR in action. As a result of the Violence Against Women Act passed by Congress in 1994 and renewed in 2006, five counties in Vermont have DV units within the state's attorneys' offices, which include a DV prosecutor, a victim advocate, and often a DV investigator who is a specially trained member of law enforcement devoted solely to aiding in DV prosecutions. Rex claims that these teams have had a positive impact on conviction rates, and by having an investigator, often accompanied by a child advocate, visit the victim the next morning after the arrest, the investigation starts immediately.

"The quicker you can move, the more success you have," Rex said. "Now we need special DV units in every county."

In 2006, the Legislature passed a statute making money available to every community interested in creating Special Investigation Units within law enforcement that may be used to focus on DV or sexual violence, or both. While Chittenden County has had one for years, known as the Chittenden Unit for Special Investigation, a unit was created just last year to serve Franklin and Grand Isle counties. And, more are on the way.

Later this year, according to Judge David Suntag, the presiding family court judge in Bennington, the county will have one day a week devoted to an integrated DV docket, meaning that relief from abuses cases heard in family court will be heard along with criminal cases. This should make it easier on everyone, Suntag said, to have resources available at the same place and same time, and to have the consistency of the same judge presiding over both cases.

Another example of coordinated agency response stems from federal funding that began in 1996, as part of the Rural DV and Child Victimization Grant, known as the Rural Project. For the past 11 years, the Network, the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and Vermont Center for Crime Victim's Services, have had extensive dialogues on how to best service children and families where there is an overlap of child maltreatment and DV.

Statistics range, but the consensus according to Amy Torchia, the Network's children's advocacy coordinator, is that when intimate partner violence exists, there is a 30 to 60 percent chance of child abuse as well.

The Rural Project allowed the state to establish an internal DV unit within DCF, a statewide position for a child advocacy specialist at the Network, and four child/youth advocates in four DV programs around the state.

In 2003, DCF finalized their DV policy, which makes it clear that it is in a child's best interest to have all family members be safe. Therefore, any specific DV policy and practice must be based on the following three principles: remove blame for DV from victims, hold offenders responsible for the violence and corresponding risk that violence poses to children, and examine and implement strategies that support victims of DV in providing safety and well-being for their children.

Torchia made clear that children have a range of responses to DV, and DV should not automatically be equated with child abuse or parental negligence. To take a child away from the non-offending parent, Torchia said, may end up being more traumatic for the child. It also makes victims and children less likely to seek help if they know that their family will be broken up. However, Torchia adds, there are situations where it is best to get a child into foster care.

Nationally it's estimated that 3.3 million to 10 million children are exposed to DV in their homes. In 2006, the Network provided services to 1,450 children and identified 9,119 children and youth as having been exposed to DV in their homes. That's 7 percent of Vermont's children.

### **In the Workplace**

In 2000, Gov. Howard Dean issued an executive order that recognized the prevalence of DV in the workplace and the need for all employers to maintain a safe, secure workplace. In response to this order, the Attorney General convened a task force that created a brochure on DV in the workplace, a model policy, and trainings for employers.

Assistant Attorney General Amy Fitzgerald runs this program for the office. In the past several years, she has conducted trainings for many public and private employers in the state including Blue Cross and Blue Shield, the University of Vermont, the Vermont State Housing Authority, and most recently Burlington, which is in the process of adapting the model policy as their own.

Perhaps the most vivid example of policy adoption comes from the Burlington Police Department. On April 4, 2007, the civil commission that must review all police department policies approved a policy that takes a zero tolerance approach toward DV offenders on staff.

The brainchild of Police Chief Tom Tremblay, who serves as a faculty member on the National Law Enforcement Leadership Institute on Violence Against Women, discussed how throughout his 24-year career as a member of Burlington's police force, his mind has been full of images of violence, the majority of which were perpetrated against women by men. He often asks himself what, as a male leader in the community, he can do about this issue.

Using the attorney general's model policy as a starting point, members of the union, Mary McAllister, the department's victim advocate, and the chief drafted a policy that defines a zero tolerance approach toward offenders of DV who are on staff, including prevention and training

efforts so that if there is evidence of troubling behavior help can be sought immediately, and a protocol for handling a DV call in which an officer is involved.

Tremblay acknowledged that some questioned the need for such a policy in light of the fact no one in the department in recent history had been arrested for DV. “We must model for the community what we expect,” explained Tremblay.

Information regarding private employers and their DV policies is harder to come by. Yet, according to a National Safe Workplace Institute Survey, 94 percent of corporate security and safety directors rank DV as a “high” security problem. The Family Violence Prevention Fund estimates that 74 percent of victims who experience DV at home are also harassed at work, and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control projects that nearly 8 million days of paid work are lost each year as a result of DV, an equivalent of 32,000 full-time jobs.

Locally and nationally, Verizon Wireless is one of more visible companies taking a stand against DV. Laurie Severino, associate director of human resources for the northeast, said that DV is specifically addressed in their code of business conduct that every employee must read and sign every year, and that the language has been included since the company’s founding in 2000. The company employs 55 people in Vermont, and 65,000 nationwide.

Because of their national presence, another benefit a survivor at Verizon has is the ability to relocate to another office if safety requires it. Employees also have access to EAP, a 24/7 emergency counseling service, that Severino explained is well versed in how to help victims of DV.

Since its inception, Verizon Wireless has also worked closely with DV shelters throughout New England and the country, providing monetary support as well as refurbished, prepaid cell phones with voicemail that survivors can use in a project known as HopeLine. In 2006, New England’s HopeLine collected more than 60,000 used cell phones and donated more than \$80,000 and 500 phones to 50 DV agencies.

### **A National Role Model**

Perhaps one of the most groundbreaking examples of CCR is the Agency of Human Services (AHS) DV Initiative, which sets out to institutionalize a consistent, well-thought out framework for how to assist DV victims who come in contact with the agency as well as for employees who are experiencing DV.

AHS is the largest state employer in Vermont with 3,550 employees and in 2006 provided services to approximately 200,000 Vermonters. Its departments include corrections; the department for children and families; the department of disabilities, aging, and independent living; and the department of health.

Richard said the opportunity for such a project came about five years ago when AHS went through a significant reorganization. A conversation arose at the Vermont Council on DV (the

Council) about how it might be possible to use the opportunity of the reorganization to implement a more effective and integrated response to DV.

In 2004, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the four primary statewide players in the DV world — the Network, the Council, the Center for Crime Victim Services, and AHS — that solidified each organization’s role in the process: the Network and Council would facilitate the discussion providing its DV expertise, while AHS had the responsibility for determining how best to respond within its structure.

This is a groundbreaking initiative, said Sherry Burnette, AHS trauma coordinator and member of the initiative’s task force.

Privately funded by a grant from the Altria Foundation for its first two years, the initiative has completed two phases: It laid the foundation for meaningful, and often difficult discussions by engaging AHS leaderships at all levels and defining general outcomes; and, it created structures that would allow for implementation and each department did a systems assessment of their DV policies.

Some of the report’s findings jump out: No department has a department-wide DV policy; every department identified the need for workplace policies to address the needs of employees who are victims of DV and the broader issue of perpetrator accountability and staff safety; and only a handful of divisions have specific policies that address DV.

The next phase, which could easily take years to complete, has each department and division define and implement appropriate DV policies for their clients.

While the secretary of AHS, Cynthia LaWare, has expressed support for this initiative, she has not yet allocated any money toward its implementation. The Altria Foundation funding has expired, and while there are expectations on all levels that this project will continue, Richard acknowledges the process will be slowed.

June Bascom, the department of disabilities, aging and independent living’s program development and policy analyst and a member of the initiative’s steering committee, admitted that she had limited exposure to DV before coming to the project. Now, she believes it should be one of the agency’s top priorities, period.

“When you look at the impact of DV in the news, the percentage of violent crime associated with DV, and its costs to society — people being out of work, lost productivity, etc. ... if you stop and recognize the full impact, DV should be one of the top priorities for AHS. Yet it’s easy to forget about, because it can be so invisible on a day-to-day basis if it’s not affecting you personally,” Bascom said.

But if the initiative succeeds, many believe it will serve as a model for state agencies across the country.

Now through May 31, Vermonters can drop off their old cell phones to Verizon Wireless stores in Burlington and Rutland, and they will donate \$5 per phone to each of two local shelters, Burlington's Women Helping Battered Women and Rutland County Women's Network and Shelter.

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