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Ken Rodriguez: SAPD's New Method of Handling Domestic Violence is Paying Off

If family safety advocates were to honor a Person of the Year, they might hand the 2007 award to Police Chief Bill McManus.

On the last day of February, McManus changed the way SAPD handles domestic violence complaints.

Nine months later, the results offer a strong indicator of progress: a significant increase in arrests and a notable reduction in reported assaults.

What did the chief do?

He told his officers to reverse course. Instead of taking cases to the district attorney's office, officers obtained arrest warrants — immediately — and pursued alleged assailants. "I think it's worked the way we intended it to work," McManus says.

In 2006, SAPD received an average of 970 domestic assault reports per month, according to the department's figures. Through October of this year, the average has dropped to 858 — and that includes January and February when the old policy was in place.

Last year, SAPD averaged 223 family violence arrests per month. Through October, that number has jumped to 299.

Crime statistics can be tricky, sometimes deceptive. In this case, though, the numbers sound believable. A surge in arrests should not surprise when it becomes easier to pursue suspects of a frequent crime.

Under the old policy, an officer took a complaint from a victim, then forwarded it to a detective, who investigated the claim, prepared a report and gave it to the DA. If the assault was a misdemeanor, the complaint wound up in a filing cabinet until the victim followed up with detectives.

By the time an arrest warrant was issued, a perpetrator may have beaten the same victim multiple times.

McManus shortened the process from months to hours. Today, an officer meets with victim, finds probable cause of assault, gets a judge to sign an arrest affidavit, then uses a warrant to pursue the suspect.

“In many cases prior to the policy change,” McManus says, “complainants were either killed or seriously hurt.”

Consider Dolores Bibiano. On Feb. 18, police say a longtime boyfriend dragged her by her hair up a flight of stairs and broke her neck, leaving her paralyzed.

Three months earlier, police say, the same boyfriend beat her. Officers took a report from Bibiano, but never made an arrest.

Consider what happened to Antonio and Teena Perez. On Feb. 11, Antonio fatally shot his wife in the chest, then put a bullet through his head. The day before, he'd fired a shot at Teena and missed. Police took a report and left.

After the murder-suicide and broken neck cases, the chief convened a meeting of family safety advocates and community leaders. Out of that gathering came the policy change, recalls Patricia Castillo, executive director of the PEACE Initiative.

“I appreciate that kind of leadership and initiative,” Castillo says.

SAPD is not alone in its new approach to domestic violence. The Dallas and Fort Worth police departments have used similar arrest warrant procedures for years.

Houston has not. A sergeant there says Houston police log more than 30,000 reports of domestic assaults each year. The sergeant also says officers must go through the district attorney's office to get arrest warrants.

In San Antonio, the system remains imperfect. Though faced with more aggressive officers, perpetrators can post bond, get out of jail and strike again.

Help on that front is on the way. On Jan. 1, a new law goes into effect that will allow judges to deny bail to suspects who have violated protective orders. A piece of paper will get some teeth, and that makes the chief smile. To protect victims from more violence, he needs every weapon he can get.

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