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## **New Database to Track PFA Violators; Action came from Recommendations by Task Force after Woman's Slaying**

**By Mike Bucsko, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

For years, Allegheny County's system for keeping track of criminal arrest warrants for people who violate protection from abuse orders has been cumbersome for victims and sometimes required the skills of a detective to find outstanding warrants.

An order signed yesterday by President Judge Joseph James of Allegheny County Common Pleas Court will take the burden off the victims and provide a centralized computer database that will provide access to warrants for law enforcement agencies.

The order was part of a petition District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. presented to James during a brief hearing yesterday.

"This centralized database had been a long time coming," James said.

The new system, which will begin Nov. 15, consolidates the process for filing indirect criminal contempt complaints in domestic abuse cases when people who have protection from abuse orders against them violate the terms of the orders.

The petition grew out of recommendations from a task force established after the April 18 death of Andrea Umphrey.

Umphrey, 35, was abducted from a Sheraden church by her estranged fiance, Alvin Starks, who afterward led police on a 50-mile chase that ended when police said Starks fatally shot Umphrey as they sat in a van at the Monroeville entrance to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Starks, 30, of Windgap, faces the death penalty in Umphrey's killing.

Umphrey had filed several protection from abuse petitions against Starks before the abduction that resulted in her death. However, the county's Family Division was not aware that Starks had violated the PFAs during his attempts to receive custody of the couple's daughter because of the warrant accounting system.

There are several problems with the system as it exists now, not the least of which is the confusion in tracking down arrest warrants and maintaining an accurate record of warrants and arrests.

If a person violates terms of a protection from abuse order, a complaint is filed in the Criminal Division of Common Pleas Court and an arrest warrant is issued. But the burden is on the victim to make sure the police in the municipality where the perpetrator and the victim live, which could be two separate places, receive the information about the complaint.

Marc Booker, legal advocate for Crisis Center North, said the eyes of victims sometimes glaze over when he explains the process to them. "It's three or four complicated steps where they have to go here or there," Booker said. "There's too much burden on the person who's been traumatized."

The new system will coordinate the filing of criminal contempt complaints at the entry point – the county's 52 district justices – and remove the burden from the victims. The victim will file a complaint with police, and the district justice will determine if probable cause exists to file a warrant.

From there, the complaint and information on the defendant and victim will be distributed to the sheriff's office, local police departments and the county's family court. Local police departments will receive the information from the county's regional 911 dispatch centers.

The sheriff's office will enter the warrant information into a database, which will provide access to sheriff's deputies and local police. The cost of the new system was about \$2,000, mainly for new computer software, which came from the drug forfeiture fund in the district attorney's office, Zappala said.

In Allegheny County, there have been more than a dozen homicides this year in domestic abuse cases, which trail only drug and drunken driving cases in total number of criminal cases.

While the new system will help consolidate the process of filing and tracking criminal contempt warrants in domestic abuse cases, prosecutors and victims' advocates are not under the illusion that it will prevent violent incidents in the future.

"It's not clear to me that any of these homicides happened because we didn't have centralized database," said Lorraine Bittner, legal director for the Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh. "But I feel confident that it's going to have a huge impact."

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