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Police Apply Test of Deadly Risk – Program Assesses Danger in Cases of Domestic Violence

By Justin Fenton | Baltimore Sun reporter

It used to be that police officers responding to the scene of a domestic violence call would gauge the volatility of a situation using little more than intuition and a dash of hope. They'd advise victims to get help and trust that they would reach out to counselors.

But a growing number of police agencies across Maryland have been connecting victims with support groups and counselors on the spot – while emotions are still raw and before the attacks turn deadly – using a quick checklist of research-based indicators of risk.

Law enforcement agencies in 58 jurisdictions statewide have adopted “lethality assessments” over the past two years, during which time almost a third of the 900 victims who spoke to a counselor on the scene later showed up at a domestic-violence agency seeking a protective order, shelter, counseling, a support group or other service.

Advocates say the program is part of a broader effort to increase knowledge about domestic violence. The questions were developed from research into a concise patrol tool by a group that included police, prosecutors and researchers, and they want everyone from health care providers to judges to understand the significance of a victim's answers.

“As first-responders, we're getting there in the heat of the moment,” said Cpl. Tracy Farmer of the Harford County Sheriff's Office, which was among the first agencies to use the program. “If you get with these victims a couple of days later, they have time to rationalize [the assault]. The batterer will be trying to make amends. ... It's helpful to not only tell them of the resources available, but to get the ball rolling.”

Across the country, some local police jurisdictions are using lethality assessments, tailoring them to the dynamics of their communities. “I think there are a lot of states that are really interested in seeing how Maryland can implement this on a larger scale,” said Cheryl L. O'Donnell, communications director for the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “To have something that is relatively cookie-cutter will not work everywhere.”

Patrol officers first ask three questions of the victim that address direct threats of deadly violence: Has your partner ever used a weapon against you or threatened you with a weapon? Has he or she threatened to kill you or your children? Do you think he/she might try to kill you?

A positive response to any of the questions immediately prompts a call to counselors.

An additional eight questions might also be asked, including whether an attacker has tried to choke the victim and whether the attacker has access to a weapon.

“We seem to always be addressing these issues after the fact and lamenting that a tragedy occurred,” said Michael Cohen, executive director of the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence. “Obviously, we’re also concerned about people in abusive situations that aren’t potentially lethal, but we’re hoping that the number of homicides and even suicides that result from these situations can diminish.”

Federal statistics show that “intimate-partner homicide” – the killing of a spouse, ex-spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend – has declined significantly during the past 25 years. Women, however, remain substantially more likely to be murdered by someone close to them: 1,181 women died in intimate-partner homicides across the United States in 2005, the most recent year available, compared to 329 men. It is the leading cause of death for black females ages 15 to 45.

Sixty-three people died in Maryland in fiscal year 2006 as a result of domestic violence, according to statistics compiled by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence.

Jacquelyn Campbell, a nursing professor at the Johns Hopkins University who developed lethality assessments two decades ago for advocates and health professionals, said the program should be used as a guide and is not intended to be a cure-all.

She said the questions address research-based findings of domestic violence: women who were threatened with a gun are 20 times more likely to be murdered, and women whose partners threatened them with murder are 15 times more likely than other women to be killed. Choking was also found to be a high-risk indicator of homicide.

“We’ve had this research, but it had never been brought to the level of the first-responder,” said Dave Sargent, a retired Washington police lieutenant who trains officers across Maryland to use lethality assessments.

A recent Harford County case illustrated the program’s effectiveness. Days after a woman and her husband got into an argument; his rage was still imprinted on her body, with bruising to her wrist and arm. She told deputies that he was a good man, and that it was probably her fault.

But when given the lethality assessment, the victim said he had threatened to kill her and threatened her with a gun several times. Asked if she thought he might kill her, she responded, “Maybe.” Those answers prompted a call right then to the Spouse Abuse Resource Center, where the woman spoke with a counselor.

Baltimore City began using a pilot program in its Northeast District last spring, and Baltimore County police implemented lethality assessments on a pilot basis this month in the Dundalk area. Bill Toohey, a spokesman for the department, said police want to observe the program before deciding whether to expand its use.

“What if a victim answers the questions and an officer says, ‘You’re in good shape,’ and terrible violence breaks out after we leave?” Toohey said. “There may be a false sense of confidence in a tool like this, and we want to see how it works and take a good, long look at it.”

In Anne Arundel County, police began formally using lethality assessments in July. The state’s attorney’s office recently received a grant to help fund a “lethality assessment advocate” who will work with high-risk victims to ensure they are supported throughout the prosecution of a case. Judges, who are asked to consider the results of a lethality assessment when setting bail for an alleged attacker, are also being briefed on the program.

***Assessing Risk**

Police officers from across the state have started using the following checklist of questions, developed from domestic violence research, to assess a victim’s risk of lethal danger:

- Has he/she ever used a weapon against you or threatened you with a weapon?
- Has he/she threatened to kill you or your children?
- Do you think he/she might try to kill you?
- Does he/she have a gun or can he/she get one easily?
- Has he/she ever tried to choke you?
- Is he/she violently or constantly jealous or does he/she control most of your daily activities?
- Have you left him/her or separated after living together or being married?
- Is he/she unemployed?
- Has he/she ever tried to kill himself/herself?
- Do you have a child he/she knows is not hers/his?
- Does he/she follow or spy on you or leave threatening messages?

Source: Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence Victims

* Individuals killed as a result of domestic violence, by jurisdiction and fiscal year:

<u>County</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2004</u>
Anne Arundel	8	9	8
Baltimore City	15	14	16
Baltimore	10	12	14
Carroll	0	0	1
Harford	1	1	1
Howard	0	1	1
State	63	70	69

Source: Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence

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