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Practitioner Perspectives

Deirdri Fishel: Detective, State College Police Department *Victim Centered Intensive Case Management Unit*

An interview with Detective Deirdri Fishel with the State College Police Department's Victim Centered Intensive Case Management Unit in Centre County, Pennsylvania

Q: What led or motivated you to focus your work on addressing domestic violence and stalking?

A: Early in my career, I was mentored by a sergeant with the State College Police Department who was incredibly passionate about helping victims of crime, particularly women who experience violence. She helped me understand that as a female in law enforcement, it is important that I not minimize or dismiss my gender, but embrace it to better help women exposed to violence. Though she was later promoted and moved to another jurisdiction, her passion for ending violence against women really permeated with me from the beginning of my career.

Q: What is the function of the Victim Centered Intensive Case Management (VCICM) Unit?

A: The VCICM Unit is a co-located entity created in response to the recommendations of a fatality review committee convened after a domestic violence-related homicide. The Unit centralizes and coordinates Centre County's response to victims of domestic abuse and domestic stalking. The Unit is staffed by a specialized domestic violence detective and a community-based advocate, and works closely with the local prosecutor's office and other county agencies that provide investigative and victim support services.

Q: Approximately how many stalking cases do you encounter each year?

A: Of the 250 domestic violence cases investigated each year, about 10% have stalking as the lead charge, but many others have underlying elements of stalking.

Q: What are the benefits and limitations of working in a co-located unit?

A: I can tell you wholeheartedly that the benefits far outweigh the limitations. The community-based advocate often accompanies law enforcement in the field and follows-up with victims usually within 24 hours after a report is made. This enables advocates to provide victims with immediate assistance and access to services available throughout the county. This outreach approach has been incredibly effective in helping victims feel supported throughout the criminal justice process and beyond.

We initially struggled with the different professional standards of confidentiality and information sharing. However, with open communication between agencies, we were able to find ways to navigate those hurdles. We all share a common goal: ending violence in our community. We can reach this goal through collaborative efforts made by all system professionals focused on improving safety for victims and holding offenders accountable for their crimes.

Q: What advice would you give to jurisdictions interested in developing a similar type of unit to address domestic violence and stalking?

A: I recommend starting by identifying and engaging community stakeholders and high-

Detective Deirdri Fishel serves as the primary investigator and case manager for the State College Police Department's **Victim Centered Intensive Case Management (VCICM) Unit**. The VCICM Unit is responsible for investigating, coordinating, prosecuting, and responding to domestic violence and stalking in Centre County, Pennsylvania.

ranking authorities to support the idea and process of developing a similar unit. Possible stakeholders include the local prosecutor, chief law enforcement official, council members, or leaders of local victim services agencies. Having support from key community players increases your chances of success, and can help make the process significantly easier.

Q: How have you seen offenders using technology to stalk?

A: Stalkers are adept at taking the technologies we use every day and turning them into tools for their crime. The most common tools offenders use are cell phones, e-mail, and social networking sites. For example, an offender may repeatedly text message a victim or their friends to gather information or harass, or “hi-jack” e-mail or social networking accounts to “watch” or track a victim. Whatever the technology an offender may use, it results in increased anxiety for victims.

Q. How have you integrated technology in your efforts to catch stalking offenders?

A: By being aware of the ways technology can be used against victims, we have also found creative ways to use technology against offenders. For example, we know stalkers go where their victims are, so we often employ counter surveillance techniques. We may install video surveillance at a victim’s home or workplace to try catching a stalker in the act. To help link suspects to crimes committed via computer or phones, we request records from service providers, such as internet providers, cell phone carriers, and social networking site administrators.

Q. How would you respond to the accusations that law enforcement does not take stalking seriously?

A: I would say that it is sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees. There needs to be more awareness about stalking. Sometimes law enforcement needs to be told what stalking is, the impact it has on victims, and about their

governing stalking law to help identify elements of the crime, and get information necessary for a case to be investigated. We have to remember that stalkers are quite adept at taking “non-criminal” behaviors and “criminalizing” them, so understanding the context in which these behaviors occur is key in developing a stalking case.

Q. What do you think are the most pressing needs of stalking victims in your jurisdiction?

A. In Pennsylvania, as in many states, the first stalking offense is a misdemeanor, and has a punishment of a short period of probation. We know these light sentences rarely stop stalking behavior. It is also not uncommon for stalkers to use the criminal justice system to access their victims. For example, a stalker may intentionally delay their case or request repeated appearances in court to be in the same room as the victim. Even after the first or subsequent arrests, some stalkers seem to just get better at hiding their stalking. Regardless of what a stalker does, victims need to know that the criminal justice system and advocates will stay with them throughout the process until the behavior is stopped.

Q. What do you think are the most pressing needs of law enforcement to effectively address stalking?

A: Time. Personnel. Resources. Think about it, a stalker has 24 hours a day to study, follow, and harass a victim. Most police officers work eight-hour days and have more than one case they are investigating at a time. Law enforcement needs access to resources to be able to stay ahead of the stalkers instead of reactively playing catch-up to the stalking behaviors.

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