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Video Technology Put to Use; For Domestic Violence Victims

By Philip A. Stephenson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The videoconference – a technology better known for its ability to connect students to virtual classrooms and to make possible corporate meetings over vast distances – is being put to use across Allegheny County to help victims of domestic violence.

Local shelters and crisis centers have teamed up with the Allegheny County district attorney's office to provide round-the-clock electronic access to emergency protection-from-abuse orders, known as PFAs.

Similar to a restraining order, a protection-from-abuse order shields an abused person from current or former partners, spouses, parents, children, siblings or cohabitants. The order makes contact or harassment on the part of the accused a misdemeanor criminal offense.

To obtain a PFA, a victim usually files with the local district justice's office. If the order is granted, it is served on the accused by local police.

After business hours, however, a victim would have to file at the county's Night Court in Downtown Pittsburgh. For some victims who lack transportation or are unfamiliar with the city, making a night trip to Pittsburgh could be a problem.

That's where videoconferencing comes in.

Three videoconference sites have been established in the North Hills, all with 24-hour access. The police departments of Ross and Hampton are equipped, as is the emergency room at UPMC Passavant in McCandless.

"Essentially, there's a television and it's pretty much a Web cam, which is directly connected to the Night Court. [The judges] can see you and you can see them [and] the documentation is completed by fax," said William Barrett, public information officer for the Ross police department.

"The biggest advantage for the videoconferencing technology is that it does give the victim a better sense of safety ... people tend to not be comfortable moving outside of their areas," said

Marc Booker, a legal adviser for Crisis Center North, a domestic violence counseling facility serving the North Hills.

Daniel Rahuba, county arraignment court manager, said the counseling center or hospital staff usually helps the victim through the process of filling out the paperwork, which is faxed to the court. Then the judge conducts an interview with the victim via the videoconference satellite link.

Crisis Center North worked with the district attorney's office and other area counseling centers and shelters to begin the program. It was funded by grants through the federal STOP Violence Against Women Program.

Booker said that Crisis Center North is working to add a fourth videoconference site in the North suburbs.

At one of the quarterly task force meetings of domestic violence service agencies in the county, Booker said, counselors and advocates agreed there had to be a better way for abuse victims to obtain emergency protection-from-abuse orders, no matter where they lived in the county.

“To ask [a] woman, who's just been through what's probably the most traumatic event in her life ... to go into Downtown Pittsburgh in the middle of the night, find Night Court and apply for an application [for a PFA], it can be almost too much [for her] to bear.”

At the Hampton Police Department, the video equipment was already in place through an earlier program to link police departments with Downtown courts.

“At first we were using it for arraignments,” said Hampton police Chief Daniel Connelly. But after the district attorney's office came forward with this program, Connelly said, the department adopted a “multiuse philosophy.”

Only emergency protection orders can be granted through videoconferencing. This means the orders are valid only until the next business day. Temporary and final orders must be granted by a district justice and can be valid for up to two weeks or 18 months, respectively.

The orders also can be obtained via videoconferencing at UPMC Braddock, UPMC McKeesport and Mercy Hospital, Uptown.

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