

Detroit Free Press (MI)

Distributed by Knight/Ridder Tribune News Service

August 2, 2006 Wednesday

What to Do About Domestic Violence: County Plan Aims to Aid Cops, Victims

By Dan Cortez, Detroit Free Press

Aug. 2 – With Macomb County deputies responding to an estimated 1,000 suspected domestic violence incidents annually, Sheriff Mark Hackel said the problem has become as common as speeding and drunken driving. Furthermore, a review showed that 87% of homicides in the county last year were related to domestic violence.

Now, judges, police and victims' advocates have a new plan for handling domestic violence cases that aims to keep them from ending in deaths.

The Macomb Community Domestic Violence Council released a report Tuesday containing several recommendations on how to improve the response of law enforcement agencies and judges.

Mainly it seeks county-wide domestic violence training and more public service campaigns that discuss the issue.

"I think there are areas where we can do better, prior to it being a murder or a homicide," said Judge Joseph C. Oster of the 40th District Court in St. Clair Shores. "We have to begin the dialogue."

Oster teamed with Sheriff's Lt. Liz Darga and representatives of the Domestic Violence Council and Turning Point, two outreach groups for victims, on the report. It was based on an 18-month review of five fatal or near-fatal incidents that grew out of domestic violence cases.

"These are not random occurrences," said Sarah Prout Stubbs of Lakeshore Legal Aid. "These are not rare occurrences."

The Sheriff's Office already trains officers in how to handle domestic violence. Darga, a former street cop who heads the detective bureau, said officers are in difficult spots when they walk into domestic disputes. "They're fighting about money, about personal issues," Darga said. "We become the referee."

A common criticism is that victims don't try to get help or leave an abusive situation, but the study found that perception is inaccurate. Victims are most vulnerable when they try to get help or go so far as to leave.

"There had been attempts to leave," Prout Stubbs said of the five reviewed cases. "There had been attempts to call police. They don't leave because they can't. They're afraid. The most dangerous time is when she leaves an abuser."

The full 13-page report will be distributed to law enforcement agencies throughout the county and also will be available to the public. Suzanne Coats, executive director of Turning Point, based in Mt. Clemens, said more ideas could come from the Macomb Community Domestic Violence Council's discussion of the report at a Sept. 15 meeting.

"This report will create the will to talk about this," she said.

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