A Register-Guard Editorial

Imagine for a moment that you’re a woman who is being physically abused by her husband or partner. Now imagine that he’s a police officer who monitors your every move and who has threatened you with violence if you seek help.

What do you do? Where do you go? Who do you talk to? Who do you trust? If you leave your abuser, you must rely on the police – your husband’s friends and associates – to enforce protective orders. If you seek refuge at a shelter, you go with the frightening knowledge that your partner knows the location of every shelter in town.

To address these and other difficult issues involving domestic violence and police officers, the Eugene Police Department recently joined a growing list of law enforcement agencies that have enacted policies addressing officers accused of spousal or partner abuse.

At the heart of the new policy is a zero-tolerance stance toward abuse. That’s a welcome, proactive approach in a profession whose culture make it vulnerable to problems involving family violence.

Under the new policy, police officers must notify supervisors once they learn that a report of abuse involves an employee of any law enforcement agency. Written reports are mandatory, even if only sketchy information is available, and abuse victims can request that their cases be handled by jurisdictions other than the one that employs their spouse or partner.

Other key provisions include automatic revocation of confidentiality rights for people who confess to being abusive. Agency employees, even police chaplains, must report any allegations of abuse that are reported to them. Meanwhile, the agency is required to provide regular training on domestic violence, and to screen recruits for possible abusive histories and tendencies.

By becoming the first local law enforcement agency to adopt such a policy, the Eugene department has taken a welcome leadership role on a problem that for too long has has been unrecognized and unaddressed. The Lane County sheriff’s office recently included a similar
policy in an updated operations manual that is expected to be approved in the near future. Meanwhile, the Springfield Police Department is also considering taking similar measures.

As Register-Guard reporter Rebecca Nolan noted in a recent story, the new policy was inspired by the high-profile tragedy involving Tacoma Police Chief David Brame, who two years ago killed himself and his wife after years of spousal abuse. As a result of the Brame case, the Washington Legislature approved the nation’s first statewide mandate requiring law enforcement agencies to put policies in place that deal with the issues involving domestic violence and police. By adopting policies on their own in the absence of a state mandate, Eugene and other local agencies are making a pro-active move that could prevent a tragedy similar to the Brame case from occurring in Lane County.

Adoption of such policies by local departments should not be taken as evidence that abuse is by any means prevalent among police officers. But it does recognize that, until now, officers lacked the same clear guidelines on how to handle domestic violence cases involving one of their own that they had for handling cases involving the general public.

For the Eugene Police Department, the new policy also helps counter the major damage done to the agency’s reputation by last year’s sexual abuse scandals involving two police officers.

While neither of those cases involved domestic violence, the new policy sends a welcome message that the department is taking strong, meaningful steps to prevent police officers from using their uniquely powerful position to inflict harm.

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