When Police Are Caught in the Middle

By Jane Gordon

Hundreds of domestic violence calls come into police stations and to the State Police throughout Connecticut each week. But the two that arrived recently, one at the end of December and the other on Jan. 12, ended in three deaths, one of them a police officer. He was the first officer to be murdered in the line of duty since 1999.

“I know that every single one of us look at domestic violence as being one of the most frightening calls you can go on,” said Sgt. J. Paul Vance, a spokesman for the Connecticut State Police. “There’s not a police officer out there who won’t tell you, ‘Yeah, I’m a little frightened,’ but that’s where the training kicks in.”

Specific domestic violence training is, for the most part, still relatively new to police departments. Years ago, police had left responding to domestic violence calls to the discretion of the officer on duty. Some responded and told the people to cool off. Sometimes, if repeated calls had come from the same address over a period of time, officers would respond slowly.

That all changed after June 10, 1983, when Charles Thurman stabbed his wife, Tracey, in the chest, neck and throat several times at Mrs. Thurman’s home in Torrington. Ten minutes earlier, Mrs. Thurman had called police, fearing for her life. A police officer arrived 25 minutes later, and watched as Mr. Thurman kicked his injured wife in the head.

Mrs. Thurman filed a lawsuit against the Torrington department and won about $2 million. The suit changed how officers responded to domestic violence, forcing police officers throughout the country to make an arrest if there has been an assault. It also put the police in the middle of often violent and emotional domestic disputes, a place they preferred not to be.

“You have a family situation that is deep seated and probably years in the making and the police officer’s mission was to keep the peace,” said James Strillacci, the president of the Connecticut Police Chief’s Association and the West Hartford police chief. “After the Torrington situation, the police officers’ task then became focused. Was there a crime committed and was there a remedy? I think police were relieved by that, to not be social workers or marriage counselors. After the initial sting for being taken to task for not handling domestic issues appropriately, police were pleased to be able to enforce the law and to be supported for it.”

Trooper William Tate of the State Police said that responding to a domestic can be horrible.
“You’re going into a person’s domain, and you’re only invited because of bad behavior,” she said. “It’s awkward because you have to deal with people and their emotions. There might be a tremendous history and you’re expected to resolve it in a few moments.”

In the most recent cases, Peter J. Lavery, a Newington police officer, died on Dec. 30 during a domestic dispute at a home. Searching for the suspect, Bruce A. Carrier, Officer Lavery stepped down the stairs of the basement and was shot to death by Mr. Carrier, who later shot and killed himself. In a second incident on Jan. 12, State Trooper Todd Harbeck arrived at a house in Lisbon in time to see James Baker holding a gun over his former girlfriend, Dina Hoagland. When the trooper told Mr. Baker to drop the gun, Mr. Baker shot Ms. Hoaglund in the head, then shot himself dead. The trooper had fired a shot, but missed.

Both officers had received training regarding domestic violence. State law requires police to have a minimum of two hours instruction in domestic-violence procedure, although Sgt. Vance said the State Police exceeded that number.

“We address some basic items in domestic violence incidents,” he said. “No. 1, check for injury and be sure everyone is safe, including the officer. No. 2, we teach them how to use the information they are given, depending on the case. We teach them that they can never take a domestic violence call as routine, even if they have been there a dozen times. That is the message that has been drilled into our heads.”

Municipal police officers learn the same message, Chief Strillacci said.

“It’s one of the mandated areas where we periodically get updates,” he said. “And anytime we lose somebody, we are certainly going to look at what can be improved upon. With the Newington case, for one, the complaint came from a third party, the daughter. Secondly, the suspect’s history had not occurred in Newington, so the dispatcher did not have the history, and third, opportunity was lost in the interview of the girlfriend who had come to the door, because intoxication was involved and she did not know the extent of the weaponry.”

Police officers typically will separate the people fighting and establish separate stories, he said. In the Newington case, the officers spoke to the woman, then called to the suspect.

“He essentially invited the officer down, and without a reason to fear, walked down and was shot,” Chief Strillacci said. “Right then, it became an ambush rather than a domestic. The nature of it changed before the officer was aware of it.”

Domestic violence programs are an evolving science, said Christopher L. Morano, the chief state’s attorney. Because an earlier state law demanded that police make an arrest if an assault had occurred, in 25 percent of Connecticut’s domestic-violence cases the police were arresting both victim and abuser, one of the highest rates in the nation, according to the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence. With the potential for an arrest hanging over their heads, Connecticut victims began hesitating to call police at all.
A Connecticut law passed in 2004 amended the existing law, giving police more authority to arrest only the abuser. Now, a 15-minute training video from the chief state’s attorney’s office is being sent to police departments, outlining changes, including how to assess whether the victim needed to use self defense.

Mr. Morano is an advocate of creating separate courts that exclusively handle domestic-violence incidents. Because repeat offenders are seen by the same judges, prosecutors and advocates in these courts, their histories are well-known to the police, to dispatchers, to prosecutors and to judges.

“There is no doubt in my mind that we have got to do more,” Mr. Morano said. “Long before these two high-profile cases occurred, I have felt that domestic violence cases are far too common. What worries me is how little people react to it. It’s like living near an airport. You don’t hear the noise anymore.”

Domestic violence courts, or dockets, have been in existence in Bridgeport, Stamford and New Haven for several years, and for just a year in Windham. Mr. Morano had applied for a grant for an inspector and a police officer to travel to various jurisdictions to create more domestic violence courts.

Kevin Dunn, the assistant state’s attorney in charge of the Bridgeport court, told the story of a recent Bridgeport case in which a husband became upset with his wife because their child’s toilet training was not going smoothly. The husband put a shotgun to the woman’s head, Mr. Dunn said. If the child had another accident, Mr. Dunn said the man told his wife, “I’m going to blow your head off.” The woman called the police. Although the victim decided to withdraw the complaint, Mr. Dunn proceeded with the charges.

“With this program, we get to know the constant offenders,” Mr. Dunn said. “And now, especially with what happened in Newington, awareness is heightened.”

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