

## Local police receive training to spot domestic violence

By Norman Miller/Daily News staff

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When Dorothy Giunta-Cotter was killed by her husband in a murder-suicide in Amesbury in 2002, police and domestic violence social workers were at a loss for words.

The victim, who had a long history of being beaten by her husband, William Cotter, did everything she was supposed to do she got a restraining order, she went to the police and sought help from counselors, but she was still murdered, said Kelly Dunne, associate director of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center.

"Before this happened, we would say we had great services," she said, speaking to a group of Framingham Police officers yesterday. "She was one of the victims who did everything the system asked of her, and this is what happened. Really, for us, this case completely flipped how we handled domestic violence cases."

So the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, an advocacy group, along with the Amesbury Police and other agencies decided to find a new way to handle high risk domestic cases and started the Greater Newburyport Domestic Violence High Risk Case Response Team.

Dunne and Amesbury Police Detective Robert Wile yesterday presented a two-and-a-half-hour class to Framingham officers on the program, which the department will be implementing in June.

The program is designed to identify high risk cases of domestic violence those that show signs of escalating to murder. It focuses on helping the victim, as well as making it more difficult for the abuse to continue.

The 55 domestic violence deaths in 2007 were the most in Massachusetts in 15 years. That includes both murders and suicides, Dunne said. There were 31 deaths in 2006 and 19 in 2005.

"None of this stuff we're teaching you is new," said Wile. "It's just a matter of recognizing it and stopping it before it happens."

Dunne said, "Risk assessment is not a crystal ball. It's another tool for you to use."

Those who work with domestic violence formed a team including the Crisis Center, the Amesbury Police, the Essex County district attorney's office and the local court victim/witness advocates.

The group meets monthly, and potential high-risk cases will be presented to the team. The group looks at a list of risk indicators, and hashes the case out to see whether it should be considered high risk.

Dispatchers can tell a case is a priority if there are numerous emergency calls and contact with victim services.

The offender is not ignored. There could be more intense supervision and an extra effort to get pretrial probation.

"If we can contain and maintain these offenders, we can better prevent these incidents from happening," Dunne said.



*Amesbury Police Detective Bob Wile speaks about identifying domestic abuse victims during an event yesterday in Framingham.*

The group lets members share the information they have on a particular case, instead of the information being split between police, domestic violence counselors and courts, Dunne said.

High-risk domestic violence indicators put out by the group includes: a history of domestic violence, increased severity or frequency of violence, threatening to use a weapon, strangulation, forced sex, violent jealousy, drug or alcohol abuse and violence during pregnancy.

The Framingham risk assessment team will be led by Voices Against Violence, and will include the Framingham Police, the Framingham District Court probation department, MetroWest Medical Center, the parole department and the Middlesex district attorney's office.

The program is scheduled to go into effect at the end of June.

Middlesex District Attorney Gerry Leone said the program will be an important tool to help domestic violence victims and to prevent future violence.

"Its focus and its mission is really where we need to be, not only in law enforcement and public safety and the social service aspect, as well," he said. "Part of the problem that we've identified with domestic violence is there is slippage due to the fact that partnerships aren't tight enough."

The new team will strengthen those partnerships so everyone has the same set of facts when dealing with a case, he said.

"That's a critical component," Leone said.

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