

A coordinated effort: High Risk Case Response Team focused on curtailing domestic violence

Amesbury News

By Kevin Doyle / kdoyle@cnc.com
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Following the March 26, 2002 murder of Amesbury resident Dorothy Guinta-Cotter by her husband, it became apparent to officials at the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center a different approach to combating domestic violence was needed.

Guinta-Cotter's murder occurred despite close monitoring by social service and law enforcement agencies. The tragedy shook the community to its core and revealed a need for coordination among agencies. Kelly Dunne, the center's Associate Director, and attorney Mardi Chadwick, the center's Director of Client Services, created the model for the High Risk Case Response Team that now serves Amesbury, Newburyport and surrounding communities.



Officials at the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center helped created the High Risk Case Response Team that now serves Amesbury, Newburyport and surrounding communities. The group met for a press conference this week honoring the team's work at Newburyport District Court. Courtesy photo

"As a community, we couldn't let that incident pass. We had all tried our best with what we had available at that time," Dunne said Tuesday during a press conference honoring the team's work at Newburyport District Court.

"What we found out is that we were doing our work well as individuals, but not in a coordinated way," Dunne said.

The multi-discipline team includes Dunne and Chadwick, Amesbury Police Detective Robert Wile, Newburyport Police Inspector Harrison Whitney, Newbury Police officer Patty Fisher and Newburyport District Court Chief Probation Officer Patricia Kane among others. The Geiger Center, a half-dozen area police departments, The Family Project at Caritas Holy Family Hospital in Methuen and Anna Jaques Hospital in Newburyport form the partnership with a mission of promoting family safety and bringing justice to bear on batterers.

In developing the team approach, Dunne said fundamental questions needed to be addressed.

"Can we interrupt that cycle of violence? Could we effect the outcome with the early identification of perpetrators, coordination and by providing increased monitoring?" were among the most pressing issues, Dunne said.

State Representative Michael Costello (D, Newburyport) said the team is doing just that.

"This team is in the forefront of domestic violence predictability. When you have information, you can try to alter outcomes," said Costello, who serves on Gov. Deval Patrick's Anti-Crime Council and chairs the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security.

Data collected from 42 domestic violence cases accepted by the team from April of 2005 through April of 2007 revealed that all of the cases involved a male perpetrator and a female victim.

Among victims, 93 percent reported previous domestic violence, 57 percent had children in common with the perpetrators, 55 percent reported a non-fatal strangulation incident, 86 percent had restraining orders against their perpetrators at the time the case was accepted, and two reported re-assaults after the team accepted the case.

Perpetrators' profiles revealed that 74 percent had substance abuse problems, 12 percent had diagnosed mental health disorders, 66 percent threatened to kill their partners, 57 percent exhibited stalking behavior, and 24 percent used a weapon in an assault.

Thirty-one of the 42 cases accepted by the team led to criminal justice involvement and 75 percent of the dispositions resulted in incarceration. Eight perpetrators were fitted with GPS tracking devices. According to the report, there have been no violations in any cases using GPS tracking.

Essex County District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett pledged his office's unwavering support of the team, saying, "Batterers, more often than not, are serial batterers. Domestic violence, more often than not, is murder waiting to happen."

Kevin Burke, Secretary of the Executive Office of Public Safety said, "Domestic violence is a cultural problem that has existed for centuries. There is an evolutionary process in law enforcement that has certainly occurred here in Essex County. The key is making domestic violence a topic people have to discuss even if they're uncomfortable about it,"

Suzanne Dubus, the Executive Director of the Geiger Crisis Center, cited statistics compiled by Jane Doe, Inc. There have been 39 domestic violence deaths in Massachusetts this year and the projection of 58 domestic homicides by the end of this year would represent a staggering 44 percent increase over the total of 34 in 2006.

Amesbury police responded to nine domestic disturbances from Wednesday, Sept. 13 through Monday of this week, resulting in three arrests.

Wile said 33 percent of the cases at the Geiger Crisis Center come from Amesbury.

"I pretty much spend all my time these days with domestic violence and sexual assault cases. Those numbers are high but I think part of the reason is that people feel more comfortable talking to the police now. Every case that comes into the department is followed up on," Wile said.

Wile said that, despite public perception, the number of domestic cases in Amesbury doesn't correlate directly to the availability of low income housing in town.

"That's what people immediately think, but our cases come from all across the community," he said.

Whitney hopes the team approach is adopted across the commonwealth.

"We were the first to come up with the model and I hope others can replicate it," said the 27-year veteran of the Newburyport department. "This approach allows us to monitor very closely and to be proactive. We meet monthly and give consideration to every case we have on the table."

The High Risk Case Response Team was awarded the Essex County Anti-Crime Council's 2006 Good Citizens Award. It will receive The Spirit of Advocacy Award from the National Network to End Domestic Violence on Thursday, Oct. 4 at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington, D.C.