

Tragedy's legacy Woman's killing tightens coordination of efforts on domestic violence

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When a colleague told Kelly Dunne that there had been a murder the night before, she knew the victim was Dorothy Giunta-Cotter.

"I said, 'It was Dorothy,' " said Dunne, associate director for the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, a domestic violence advocacy organization based in Newburyport and Amesbury. "We worked with almost 1,200 women that year, but that was my immediate reaction. Her case had almost every single red flag for lethality that we know from the research done on domestic violence and intimate partner homicide."

Many saw the 2002 murder-suicide of Giunta-Cotter and her estranged husband, William Cotter, as a failure of the system to protect a battered woman, despite the fact that she had obtained restraining orders and worked with counselors, the police, and the courts to escape the situation.

This weekend, the former figure skater and cheerleading coach will be remembered at the first Dorothy's 5K Run, to be held Sunday in conjunction with the 17th annual Walk Against Violence, to benefit the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center. The events will both be held at the Bartlett Mall in Newburyport, with registration at 11 a.m.

But Giunta-Cotter's legacy is at work every day in a coordinated effort among those who seek to keep domestic battery victims alive as they move from harm's way. Her death forced those from the Geiger center and law enforcement personnel to rethink their handling of high-risk domestic violence cases.

The result was the Greater Newburyport High-Risk Response Team, which unites police, prosecutors and victim-witness advocates, probation officials, batterers' intervention teams, and hospital staffers to prevent violence. They share information, screen cases, and identify those most at risk.

The Giunta-Cotter case highlighted deficiencies in the system, Dunne said. All of those involved, from courts to the police, were doing their jobs with limited knowledge of the situation.

"We didn't have a way to flag high-risk perpetrators, and didn't have a way to communicate all of this information," Dunne said. "Each component of the system was only working with certain pieces of information. No one had all of the information in this case. If you take one violation of the restraining order, that gives you one piece, but if you add the context, with Dorothy trying to leave him, it looks much different."

Members of the high-risk team include police from Amesbury, Newburyport, Newbury, Salisbury, West Newbury, Rowley, and Merrimac, as well as representatives from Essex District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett's office, Anna Jaques Hospital in Newburyport, Caritas Holy Family Hospital in Methuen, and consultant Diane Rosenfeld, a lecturer at Harvard Law School. Dunne is the coordinator.

"Everybody comes from a different perspective, and intersects in a different way," said Cheryl Watson, chief of victim-witness services for the district attorney's office. "Every person who comes to the table is passionate about the issue. Everybody's invested and really involved."

In monthly meetings, they discuss potential high-risk cases. They have also developed a common lexicon passed on to others in their departments, as well as a shared understanding of high-risk indicators. For example, they don't use the word "choke," but "strangle," to emphasize the potentially deadly consequences.



Kate Liddy works at the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, a domestic violence advocacy organization based in Newburyport and Amesbury. Mark Wilson/Globe Staff

"Not only do we now use the same words, but we have a greater understanding of the risk involved when strangling is part of that repertoire of behavior," said Doug Gaudette, director of the family safety project of the Caritas Holy Family Hospital, a violence intervention program.

The team has fostered cooperation and shared knowledge among local police departments, according to Amesbury Detective Robert Wile, a team member.

"We all know everybody's high-risk cases," he said. "E-mails go out, and things get put into the computer." As an example, Wile uses a traffic-stop scenario in which a dispatcher looks up the license plate and finds it belongs to a high-risk case suspect.

"That brings the patrolman to look a little bit further," Wile said.

Crisis center staffers have consulted with those on other high-risk task forces in the state, most recently Framingham and Ayer, as well as police departments in Salem and Danvers. Teams have been started in Lynn, Salem, and Peabody, coordinated by different entities.

There were 55 domestic violence related deaths in Massachusetts in 2007, prompting Governor Deval Patrick to issue a public health advisory.

In August, there were 59 domestic violence calls in Amesbury. That's believed to be a record, said Wile, but also an indicator that victims feel more comfortable coming forward.

"This high-risk team is showing the community that people are being held accountable," Wile said. "I had one lady in here yesterday who didn't want to take out a restraining order because it backfired on her up in New Hampshire. . . . I said, 'Don't worry about it; that's not going to happen. We're here to take care of that now.' You know why? Because we're all talking."

For more information, go to jeannegeigercrisiscenter.org. The 24-hour confidential hot line number is 978-388-1888.

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