

Be A Change Maker: Action Guide

Recognizing And Responding To Domestic Violence As A Law Enforcement Officer



As A Member Of Law Enforcement, You Are Uniquely Positioned To Help

Survivors/Victims in physical danger or witnesses who fear for their safety may call law enforcement for emergency help. Because domestic violence can be multifaceted, complex, and cause devastating pain, a victim-centered and trauma-informed response to domestic violence is essential. This means that officers need to understand that victims of domestic violence can display a wide variety of reactions to the violence; no two victims may express themselves in the same way.

What Is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of intentionally violent and/or controlling behavior used against a family member or a dating/intimate partner to gain power and control over that person, during, and/or after the relationship.

Starting The Conversation

- Be aware that many survivors/victims will be afraid and/or know it is not safe to share their truth in the presence of their harmdoer. It's important to gain trust by speaking to each party separately and out of ear shot from the other. Hear the stories independently and record them with as little judgment as possible.
- Be aware that this may be the first time that the survivor/victim has called the police or a neighbor, friend, or family member may have called the police and the survivor/victim will be surprised to see law enforcement, and possibly embarrassed and frightened as well.
- If the survivor/victim called the police, they may not have wanted an arrest to be made, they may have just wanted the abuse to stop.
- Ask the survivor/victim what will make them the most comfortable. Give them options and do your best to provide those options without promising what you cannot provide.
- Listen to the survivor/victim. If they seem defensive, apathetic, or hesitant these could all be coping mechanisms. Listen and understand that the survivor/victim knows what is best for their lives.
- Survivors/Victims in crisis may not have a stereotypical response when interacting with law enforcement. Trauma impacts how survivors/victims may process information and express themselves. There is no "perfect victim," and everyone deserves the opportunity to be safe from harm.
- Do not assume that the survivor/victim is not truthful or that they are not really a survivor/victim if they do not want to access law enforcement or court system resources. Survivors/victims often know best how to keep themselves safe.
- Be aware that not all abusive relationships follow stereotypical gendered expectations.
- Be aware of your body language. How you stand, your facial expressions, and your tone of voice all convey a clear message to survivors/victims about how you perceive the situation.

How To Support Survivors/Victims

- Understand that leaving the relationship may not be the best option for a survivor/victim; They know their lives best and reunification or dismissing a complaint is common. It takes a survivor/victim an average of seven (7) attempts to successfully leave an abusive relationship. A survivor/victim should feel like resources are available to them regardless of how many times they have previously attempted to leave a relationship.

- Identify what ways you can be as supportive to a survivor/victim as possible, including sharing information about local domestic violence agencies and connect them with resources to create a safety plan. Safety-planning is vital! It is possible to have a safety plan for staying as well as for leaving.
- Learn more about why do victims choose to stay:
 - The risk of homicide increases substantially when a victim leaves their abuser.
 - 75% of domestic homicides occur after survivor has left the relationship.
 - Women are five (5) times more likely to be killed when their abuser has access to a gun. Inform victims of options and resources available for removal or safer storage of firearms in a home where domestic violence is present. Be aware of what circumstances require mandatory removal or prohibitions on possession of firearms.
- Be aware that domestic violence advocates have confidentiality limitations when working with external partners. This means that they cannot communicate with law enforcement about a client's case unless they have explicit written, informed, time-limited client consent.
- Remember that domestic violence agencies can neither confirm nor deny they are serving a survivor/victim unless one of the three exceptions to confidentiality are at play: (1) client consent, (2) statutory mandate, or (3) a court order signed by a judge.

Example Scripts

Tailor To Your Style And The Situation.

1. "Can you tell me what happened?"
2. "It looks like you've been injured. How did that happen?"
3. "Were any threats made against you?"
4. "Are there weapons in your home?"

Know the Resources

- North Carolina Domestic Violence Service Providers (DVSPs) can assist survivors/victims with safety planning.
- Policy Recommendations to Address the Nexus of Domestic Violence and Gun Violence
- Information on trauma and intimate partner violence
- Legal Aid File It Yourself Custody Packet for Parent
- Legal File It Yourself Custody Packet for Non-Parents
- Legal Aid Simple Divorce Packet

To view the resources referenced in this guide and to connect with your agencies, please visit <https://nccadv.coalitionmanager.org/resourcemanager/resourcefile/details/689> or scan the QR code below.

This product was supported by grant number 2018-V2-GX-0061, awarded by the NC Governor's Crime Commission, NC Department of Safety, Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this product are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

For More Information Scan QR Code

