

SHERIFF & DEPUTY

A Resource for Sheriffs, Deputies, and Other Public Safety Professionals
VOLUME 74 | ISSUE 5



MEETING THE MOMENT

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ALSO INSIDE:

Surveil & Protect: Vote of Confidence... **pg16**

Evidence-Based Policing in Action **pg38**

Capital Watch: Where There's Smoke ... **pg56**

Paw Patrol: Tracking Together **pg58**

HEALING THE HURT

Often the first on the scene, law enforcement has a primary role in addressing domestic violence and assisting its victims

By Ian P. Murphy

Domestic violence (DV) is a big problem in the United States, and many experts believe that the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the conditions that often spark abuse while lockdowns kept any uptick in occurrences hidden. Law enforcement officers are often the first contact for those in abusive relationships, and a valuable link in getting help for those victimized.

Sheriff & Deputy asked several experts—Oakland County (Michigan) Sheriff Michael J. Bouchard; Andrew Campbell, founder and CEO of Campbell Research & Consulting (campbellresearchandconsulting.com); City of Petersburg (Virginia) Sheriff Vanessa R. Crawford; and Orange County (Florida) Sheriff John W. Mina about the issue and what sheriffs' offices can do to help. Here's what they said:

Sheriff & Deputy: How do you define domestic violence?

Sheriff Bouchard: Domestic violence is an incident or a pattern of behavior in which one person uses physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to control another person. Under Michigan law, a person has a domestic relationship if they are a spouse or former spouse, are in a dating relationship or former dating relationship, have a child in common, or are a resident or former resident of the same household.

Campbell: Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse that occurs between current or former intimate partners, often within the walls of the home. In addition to adults and children, companion animals can also be victimized and harmed or even killed as a result of these abusive acts.

Sheriff Crawford: Violent or aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the





violent abuse of a spouse or partner. Also, abusive behaviors in which one individual gains power over another individual. Intimate partner violence typically includes sexual or physical violence, psychological aggression, and stalking.

Sheriff Mina: Domestic violence is statutorily defined [in Florida] as any assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, sexual assault, sexual battery, stalking, aggravated stalking, kidnapping, false imprisonment, or criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another family or household member.

Sheriff & Deputy: What are a few telltale signs that domestic violence might be occurring?

Sheriff Mina: The most obvious sign that domestic violence is occurring is visible injuries, but it is important to look for additional signs, such as isolation from the community, family, and friends. When a victim is out in public, they may be reluctant to answer or engage with other people without permission from the person who may be abusing them. An abuser might also withhold financial resources from their victim and abuse children or pets.

Sheriff Bouchard: If someone is being physically abused, they will likely have frequent bruises or physical injuries consistent with being punched, choked, or knocked down—and they'll likely have a weak or inconsistent explanation for these injuries. It's also common for someone to try to cover up those physical signs with clothing or excuses. For example, you may notice that someone you care about is wearing long sleeves or scarves in the hot summer; wearing heavier-than-normal makeup or donning sunglasses indoors are also common signs of domestic abuse. With regard to emotional abuse, symptoms include anxiety, [appearing] excessively apologetic or meek, low self-esteem, etc.

Campbell: In addition to clear visible injury, emotional harm from abuse can present in many ways including fear, depression, and anxiety. In the context of law enforcement response, I did a study that found children in homes where domestic violence occurred were most likely to be described as “calm-appearing” on the scene by responding officers. Calm does not equate to safe or unharmed; when victims appear calm at a time when they shouldn't, it can be a red flag.

Sheriff Crawford: Jealousy and possessiveness. Controlling behavior. Constantly questions who you spend your time with, what you did/wore/said, where you went. Puts down everyone you know—friends are either stupid, slutty, or you are cheating with them; family is too controlling, doesn't really love you, or you are too dependent on them. Disrespectful and/or cruel to others. Teases children until they cry. Uses force during arguments—and many other signs.

Sheriff & Deputy: Are certain people or groups more susceptible to incidents of domestic violence?

Sheriff Bouchard: Domestic and family violence can affect any person irrespective of age, gender, socioeconomic status, or cultural background. It is widely acknowledged, however, that women are significantly more likely than men to experience domestic and family violence.

Campbell: Domestic violence can occur in any home. While we often see women disproportionately represented as victims in domestic violence homicides, we know that men can be victims of domestic violence, too. This form of abuse affects all races and age groups, and a growing number of cases continue to be reported among couples in same-sex relationships.

Sheriff Crawford: Researchers generally agree that among ethnic minority groups in the United States, Blacks are the most likely to experience domestic violence, followed by Hispanics and Whites. Also, domestic violence occurs in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender couples, and the rates are thought to be similar to those of heterosexual women—approximately 25%.

Sheriff & Deputy: Has domestic violence increased since the beginning of the pandemic?

Sheriff Crawford: According to the *American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, domestic violence cases increased by 25% to 33% globally in 2020. The pandemic intensified many of the conditions that can fuel intimate partner violence, with many families facing economic tension along with the stress and uncertainty created by COVID-19. The pandemic also aggravated alcohol abuse, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sheriff Bouchard: The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, and mask protocols are still being evaluated. A review of several studies says that domestic violence incidents increased by almost 10% after the imposition of stay-at-home orders.

Campbell: Studies and academic papers indicate great concern that domestic violence has increased since the pandemic. In many cases, victims may have been trapped for a prolonged period with an abuser and unable to safely call for help.

Sheriff Mina: In unincorporated Orange County, the total number of reported domestic violence cases has gone up slightly since the pandemic started, but we know that isn't the full picture of abuse in our community. Domestic violence is a crime that often occurs behind closed doors.

Sheriff & Deputy: What resources are available to help victims cope and reduce the risk of further victimization?

Sheriff Mina: When a victim reports an act of domestic violence, OCSO works to investigate the incident thoroughly and arrest anyone who is determined to be an abuser. This is the first step in protecting a victim from further violence. OCSO victim advocates also reach out to victims of domestic violence to connect them with services that can help. We have partnerships with community organizations we refer victims to, such as domestic violence shelters.

Campbell: Services differ by community, and it is important law enforcement officers have a good understanding of what may be available. Mental health services are key to assisting victims in beginning the healing process. Unfortunately, in the absence of effective intervention in this area, many victims will continue to be victimized by other partners in the future. Services must incorporate children and companion animals to have the best chance of being effective.

Sheriff Bouchard: There are several resource options available to the residents of Oakland County, which include Haven and Common Ground. Additionally, there are national programs including the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE).

Sheriff Crawford: The National Children's Alliance; the National Fraud Information Hotline; the National Organization for Victim Assistance; the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence; the National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children; the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network; and the Stalking Resource Center.

Sheriff & Deputy: How can sheriffs' offices better connect victims to those services?

Campbell: Being on a first-name basis with representatives from each relevant community agency is key to ensuring victims follow through with programs that are designed to help them. After being abused by other humans, victims may struggle to trust humans and therefore, ongoing support and consistency are critical throughout the process.

Sheriff Bouchard: Our office connects victims of domestic violence with victim advocates while conducting criminal investigations of domestic violence-related incidents. Often, law enforcement officers are the key first step in identifying and intervening in domestic violence cases. We continue to offer support to the victims by referring them to providers and other resources that can mitigate the effects and trauma of these incidents.



Sheriff Crawford: Provide information about options including specific safety suggestions and referrals; provide tangible help to victims to get a protective order, transportation to safety, or assisting in connecting with a victim advocate; arrest or charge the abuser; and believe the victim and validate that what happened was a crime.

Sheriff Mina: It is vital to develop strong relationships with community-based organizations and work together whenever possible. We invite members of our local domestic violence shelter, Harbor House of Central Florida, to work from our headquarters and share office space with our domestic violence investigators.

“We must all keep getting the message out and do everything we can to help victims and prevent further abuse.”

—Orange County (Florida) Sheriff John W. Mina

Sheriff & Deputy: Can the alleged perpetrators be rehabilitated, and what is involved in that effort?

Sheriff Crawford: Everyone has the capacity to change, but doing so requires meaningful commitment to all aspects of change. Unfortunately, most people with abusive behaviors are unwilling to commit. Many of the factors behind abusive behaviors are learned attitudes and feelings of entitlement, which can be difficult to unlearn. By acknowledging that their actions are harmful and taking responsibility for them, they can progress on the path toward correcting them.

Campbell: Perpetrators can be rehabilitated. Successful programs rely heavily on incorporating widespread, long-term mental health services and addressing the fact that many perpetrators of abuse have been victimized themselves in some way—often in childhood. Note that there is no excuse for abuse, and while better understanding a perpetrator’s history can help inform efforts to assist them, it does not diminish or dismiss the acts they committed.

Sheriff Bouchard: There are wide-ranging forms of domestic violence and an equally wide range of perpetrators with a vast array of cultural influences, experiences, learned behaviors, and mental health concerns. The goal is to identify the resources available to

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first deter the behavior of offenders and educate victims, and also rehabilitate offenders—confined or not—through proper evaluation by clinical or expert professionals.

“Domestic and family violence can affect any person irrespective of age, gender, socioeconomic status or cultural background.”

—Oakland County (Michigan) Sheriff Michael J. Bouchard

Sheriff & Deputy: What legislative or funding priorities can sheriffs promote to mitigate DV and better serve victims?

Sheriff Bouchard: Sheriffs can take individual leadership on DV issues. For example, I was on the board of a women’s domestic violence shelter, and we have a mandatory arrest policy if you see evidence of an assault. Every law enforcement leader should place funding priorities on all programs that minimize community victimization, especially victims of domestic violence. Also, a sheriff’s voice is a strong one on such issues in state capitals and Washington, D.C.

Campbell: More inclusive and far-reaching programs are desperately needed. One key barrier to victim safety is that many domestic violence shelters are unable to allow pets on-site. Increased funding and attention in this area will keep human victims of domestic violence from having to make the heartbreaking decision to leave their pet behind in a dangerous environment because the shelter won’t allow animals. Most victims in this scenario choose to remain in the abusive home or live in their cars—become homeless—rather than leaving cherished companions behind to be harmed or killed.

Sheriff Crawford: All states, the District of Columbia, and most U.S. territories have statutory or constitutional provisions that enumerate rights and protections for victims of crime. Two key federal laws also address victims’ rights: The 2004 Crime Victims’ Rights Act and the 1984 Victims of Crimes Act.

Sheriff Mina: At the Orange County Sheriff’s Office, we have invested in building a team of investigators—sworn and civilian—who have been trained in the nuances of domestic violence crimes and the complicated aspects of domestic violence. Regularly updating training on these types of crimes is extremely important, as well.

Sheriff & Deputy: What are a few good ways for sheriff’s offices to call attention to the issue during DV Awareness month?

Campbell: Trust is critical for victims to seek help, and sheriffs can help create trust by being open about the process and engaging the community in the importance of reporting suspected abuse. National estimates are that only 8% of domestic violence police reports come

from a neighbor, and sheriffs can work to ensure the community feels safe and protected when making these reports to help encourage more to do so.

Sheriff Crawford: Many law enforcement agencies now have policies mandating arrest or stating a preference for arrest in DV cases. Prosecutors are also using a wider array of options to handle domestic violence cases such as no-drop policies, evidence-based prosecution, and special district attorneys assigned to domestic violence cases.

Sheriff Mina: Working with local media partners and using an agency’s social media channels are effective strategies for educating the public on this very serious issue and ensuring residents know the resources available in their community.

Sheriff Bouchard: We need to promote an environment that recognizes DV’s effects on people and the trauma it causes, while celebrating survivors and looking for ways to reduce the stigma associated with reporting domestic violence. These efforts will help push for change in laws that do not fully support victims.

Sheriff & Deputy: What else would you like sheriffs to know about DV prevention and enforcement?

Campbell: In addition to the great risk for all in a home where domestic violence occurs, the risks often extend into the surrounding community and to the officers responding to the scene. More officers are shot and killed when responding to domestic violence in the U.S. than any other type of call. When domestic violence perpetrators also harm pets in the home, the risk for responding officers seems to increase.

Sheriff Mina: Law enforcement professionals are the first people notified and therefore, the first people who can intervene. That’s why continuous training is so important for all personnel in an agency. It is also critical that employees are aware of and updated on the social services available to survivors of domestic violence. We must all keep getting the message out and do everything we can to help victims and prevent further abuse.

Sheriff Bouchard: The Oakland County Sheriff’s Office takes reports and incidents of domestic violence seriously, and we use all reasonable and available resources to protect victims, conduct follow-up investigations, and present all evidence of criminal acts to the prosecutor’s office.

Sheriff Crawford: Domestic violence is one of the most common crimes to which law enforcement officers respond, yet it is often misunderstood. By understanding what domestic violence is, what the best practices are when responding, and what resources exist to support law enforcement work, LEOs and agencies can build the skills, capacity, and comfort to address these crimes and those involved with expertise and care.

Because these crimes 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.

Having a domestic violence policy is the first and most vital step to improving officers’ ability to address domestic violence in their community. It helps officers by making complex dynamics clearer and helps victims by ensuring a standard, trauma-informed, and victim-centered response to what often is the most painful moment a person might ever face. 🌟

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of Sheriff & Deputy.