



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence calls are challenging for call takers in any communications center. The telecommunicator picks up the line hearing the all too familiar background sounds of screaming, bickering, name-calling, or the frightened voice of a small child reporting, "My mommy and daddy are fighting." Words, when spoken from a small child, can soften the hardest of hearts. Without proper policy and procedures or adequate training in domestic violence call types, telecommunicators are left to their own judgment. Domestic violence response remains one of the leading causes of law enforcement line of duty deaths in America today, and serves to reinforce the need for additional training in proper call-handling procedures.

Telecommunicators play a vital role in receiving and processing reports of domestic violence. Domestic violence calls are life-threatening, volatile situations for victims and emergency responders, and telecommunicators must be knowledgeable regarding:

- Domestic violence facts and statistics
- Common myths (Able to identify and dispel)
- Federal, state, and local laws
- Agency policies and procedures
- Critical responder safety issues

The legal definition of domestic violence varies widely from state to state, but generally includes violence toward or physical abuse of one's spouse or intimate partner. Domestic violence victims may be married, living together, separated, divorced, or share a child in common. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, "a significant number of states include current or former dating relationships in domestic violence laws."

Typical criminal domestic violence incidents may include:

- Verbal abuse (shouting/name-calling/degrading comments)
- Threatened physical harm
- Physical abuse (pushing/shoving/slapping/hitting/choking)
- Stalking and/or intimidation
- Sexual assault and/or rape

- Serious bodily injury and/or homicide

Additional forms of domestic violence, while not criminal, may include emotional, psychological, and financial abuse. Domestic violence victims are often isolated from their friends and families by their abusers and their finances controlled or withheld, leaving them feeling helpless and trapped in the abusive relationship.

In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (“VAWA”). Under the act, all federal domestic violence violations are felonies. VAWA provides many resources and protection services for domestic violence victims (women and men). The VAWA act was reauthorized by Congress in January 2006.

Domestic violence is ultimately about control or dominance over one’s intimate partner. There are many myths which perpetuate misconceptions about domestic violence. Some of the more common myths are listed below.

Myth: “Domestic violence is not a problem in my community.”

Fact: It is estimated that 8.5 million Americans are victims of domestic violence each year and there are no geographical boundaries.

Myth: “Domestic violence only affects lower income, racial, or minority groups.”

Fact” Victims of domestic violence come from all walks of life. Victims from upper income groups typically have more available resources. Lower income victims rely on public service agencies for assistance and are tracked through such programs.

Myth: “Domestic violence victims are always women.”

Fact: Domestic violence is not gender specific, commonly affecting men, children and even family pets.

Myth: “Domestic violence is a result of drug or alcohol abuse.”

Fact: Substance abuse remains an excuse for many abusers, but does not cause imbibers to abuse their intimate partners.

Myth: “Domestic violence stems from anger control issues”

Fact: If anger control issues were the cause of domestic violence, abusers would batter individuals other than their intimate partners.

Myth: ”Domestic violence victims are heterosexual.”

Fact: Sexual orientation is not a determining factor in domestic violence.

When processing domestic violence calls, as with other life-threatening calls, the safety of the caller is paramount. Basic information gathering techniques should be observed and all pertinent information relayed to responding units. During the information gathering stage any sudden change in the caller’s behavior may indicate the abuser’s presence. Having the caller respond to “yes” or “no” questions by using codes

(i.e. such as, push a telephone button once for yes and twice for no) may be a method to obtain additional information.

Telecommunicators, through words and tone of voice, need to reassure victims that help is on the way! If the victim calls back, prior to the arrival of responding units, to cancel the request for assistance, the call should not be disregarded and responding units should be updated. Location within the location (room inside the residence where the incident is occurring) can also be significant information, as guns are commonly kept in bedrooms and knives stored in kitchens. Handguns are commonly used in domestic homicides, and obtaining weapon availability is always vital information. If available, previous records for the address should be reviewed for any prior domestic violence reports, along with arrest records, and temporary or permanent personal protective or restraining orders.

As mentioned earlier, responses to domestic violence reports pose an increased safety risk to responders and like caller safety, these risks must be a primary concern for telecommunicators. Repeat calls and victims that change their stories can cause frustration for law enforcement officers. Over time this can lead to apathetic attitudes, which can prove to be dangerous for the victim and the officers. Receiving repeat calls for assistance from the same address does not ensure the situation will be the same each time. Every domestic violence incident reported requires a law enforcement response and if available, two officers should respond whether the threat is immediate or remote. Telecommunicators should perform safety status checks of on-scene responders as they would with any high-priority incident. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) may need to respond to reports of injuries along with law enforcement units. Several EMS agencies require badges as part of their uniform attire and EMS personnel can easily be mistaken for law enforcement officers, leaving them susceptible to possible attacks. Domestic violence incidents require a coordinated response and EMS units should stage in a safe area, away from danger until law enforcement has secured the scene; the same applies to firefighters acting as first responders. Remember to consider the safety of the victim, and the responders, throughout the entire call.

Obtaining a better understanding of domestic violence will give telecommunicators confidence in identifying and handling crisis calls from victims and their children. Always consult your agency's policy and procedures for information on how you should handle domestic violence calls.

Being a part of the public safety community does not make you immune from domestic violence. If you or someone you know is currently involved in an abusive relationship, remember help is available and you are not alone. Please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or contact your local authorities.

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Resources:

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV)

www.ncadv.org

APCO Institute Public Safety Telecommunicator 1, 6th Edition, 2005

National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund

www.nleomf.com

American Police Hall of Fame

www.aphf.org

Quiz

CDE Article – Domestic Violence

Name: _____ Date: _____

Agency: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

1. Domestic violence is caused by anger control issues.
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. Domestic violence is a national crime.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. Domestic violence reports should be treated like any life-threatening call.
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. Only women are affected by domestic violence.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. When responding to domestic violence reports, EMS personnel must stage in a safe location until the scene is secured by law enforcement officers.
 - a. True
 - b. False

6. Telecommunicators are not immune from domestic violence.
 - a. True
 - b. False

7. Children and family pets may be victims of domestic violence.
 - a. True
 - b. False

8. Domestic violence is a result of drug or alcohol abuse.
 - a. True
 - b. False

9. While processing a domestic violence call for service, any sudden change in the caller's behavior may indicate the abuser's presence.
 - a. True
 - b. False

10. Domestic violence includes violence toward or physical abuse of one's spouse or intimate partner.
 - a. True
 - b. False