

ANYTHING BUT ROUTINE

Law enforcement's response to domestic violence should be more than an incident report

By Sheriff James Stuart

If citizens are asked what the most dangerous call is for our deputies respond to, they might guess a domestic. They're right! The Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office found that "Police officers are more likely to be killed responding to domestic disputes and disturbances than any other type of call."

Yet most law enforcement agencies only provide the initial training for responding to these complex calls. As a result, deputies' response to domestic violence calls can then become a matter of routine, even though the calls themselves seldom are.

In the law enforcement community, we expect to see people at their worst. If they call us, they are out of other options. Domestic calls can be dangerous and unpredictable, and that fact kept me interested in my days as a patrol deputy. I liked the excitement, but often overlooked the victim dynamics occurring right before my eyes. After all, I was there to handle the call, make an arrest if necessary, write a report, and go to my next call as efficiently as possible.

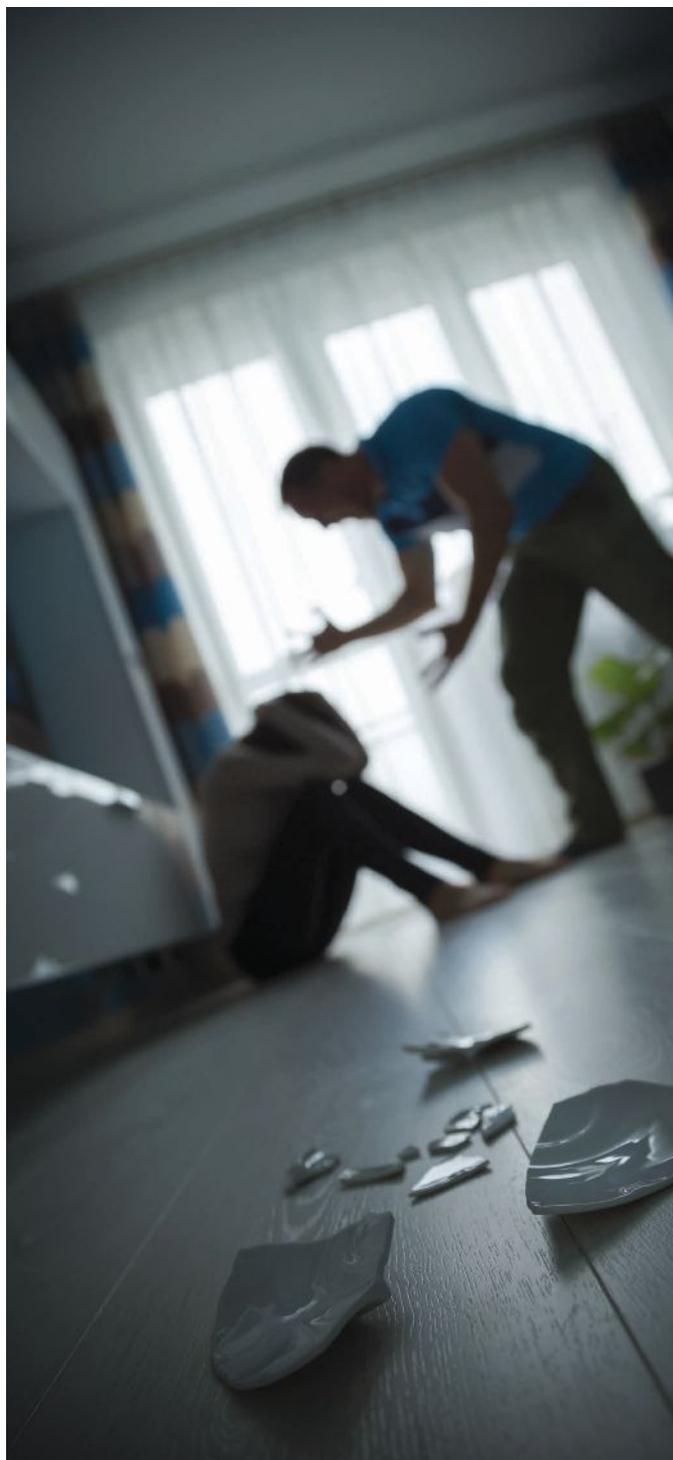
Domestic violence does not discriminate. We see it in every environment, from the poorest apartments to the richest mansions. It does not depend upon the community status, ethnicity, age, education, or religious background of the people involved. It also never takes a break from devastating lives, families, and communities.

That's why we must be more proactive in altering the course of domestic violence in our communities. And just as importantly, we must draw domestic violence into the light to prevent it from remaining a dirty little secret. We can effect change for the future if we work together, but we need everyone in the game.

Respond and repeat

When domestic violence calls requiring law enforcement response become repetitive, it is easy to consider them part of the routine. And even though our offices' patrol deputies respond to such calls routinely, our detectives process cases consistently, our court security units handle cases daily, our civil units issue protection orders regularly, and our jails house suspects and convicts constantly, we never think of these incidents as a drain on agency resources.

But that is a significant drain, and we are only one point of contact for each case's impact in our communities. Across the nation, domestic violence is estimated to cost our economy more than \$8.3 billion annually, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV). And while we could just keep responding to the calls as a matter of routine, perhaps it's time we considered how to combat domestic violence more effectively.



Ambassadors to the public

I encourage our team members to think of every public contact as an opportunity to make a positive impact. While that may sound a bit "fluffy" for some law enforcement professionals, most would agree that it ties into the core of their mission statement. I know first-hand the positive impact seemingly simple law enforcement interactions can make on a person's life.



As a youth, I was a product of domestic violence at the hands of a stepfather. Alcoholism, threats, and physical abuse were common in my home. Like many kids in that environment, I would encounter police officers from time to time. Though policing protocols were different then, I saw them as “the good guys”—noble warriors who arrived to provide safety and security in a volatile and unpredictable environment. It was the positive, caring demeanor of the officers that inspired me to want to serve others and eventually pursue a career in law enforcement.

I share that story because I want my staff and anyone reading this article to remember that there is no “routine” response to a domestic call. They are dangerous calls, and we must remain vigilant if we want to go home safely to our own loving families. But we sometimes forget that each call offers an opportunity to be an ambassador, and that our actions could be life-changing—or even life-saving—for the people involved.

Rebranding response through training

Even though we know that each domestic violence call is unique, complicated, and likely dangerous, law enforcement doesn't always invest a lot of training time into preparing for such incidents. Going beyond

the mere response to a call will take effort, but it can produce positive impacts in our communities for generations to come. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't “because that's the way it's always been done.”

Most law enforcement agencies provide initial domestic and crisis response training to new deputies. However, it is important to offer our troops ongoing training opportunities to keep them safer, more effective, and more likely to make a difference.

“There is no ‘routine’ response to a domestic call.”

Our office recently partnered with NSA to host training provided by the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW). The two-day course provided advanced response and investigative training on domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. The multi-disciplinary team of instructors included law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and victim advocates.

The training was well-received. It addressed officer safety, lethality concerns, and

liability issues while creating an environment that encouraged law enforcement officers (LEOs) to see domestic violence through a new lens. While keeping deputies safe is paramount, improving their ability to investigate cases and decrease the likelihood of return visits should also be seen as an investment.

Whether they had been on for one year or 10, the deputies in attendance expressed appreciation for the opportunity to attend. Many said they found a renewed focus on safety after learning about officers who have been killed in the line of duty while responding to calls, investigating them, and apprehending domestic assault suspects.

Participants expanded their knowledge and honed their skills in interviewing, evidence collection, report writing, and civil aspects of domestic violence calls. The instruction also allowed them to better understand the victims, while enhancing their ability to make longer-term, positive outcomes. My own team finished the training feeling safer and more effective while gaining access to a toolbox of additional resources.

An improved initial response to a domestic violence call can keep victims safer, increase perpetrator accountability, and prevent the need for future calls to the same location. While deputies across the country continue to serve and protect to the best of their abilities, we owe it to them to provide the tools to help them stay safe and continue to improve their skills.

Rethinking the basics

While the training is significant, there are numerous ways to embrace a broader spectrum of actions to make a positive difference in the domestic violence arena. Other ways for our offices and departments to continue the pursuit of public safety excellence is through developing and implementing best practices, model policies, and response protocols.

We can also dramatically improve our effectiveness by embracing the fact that we are not in this fight alone. Collaboration and community-wide cooperation is key to a broader impact. Publicly supporting and partnering with local advocacy groups and



victim shelters affirms the commitment to protect and serve.

Since actions always speak louder than words, our offices can make an impact by supporting events and activities in our counties that combat domestic violence. The events can take many forms—walks, carnivals, fundraisers, galas. If you don't already have these events in your communities, the sheriffs of America are the ideal leaders to create them.

Another effective way to collaborate with other stakeholders is to work with prosecutors, judges, and advocacy groups to establish lethality assessment programs. These programs enhance deputies' ability to evaluate victim needs, improve suspect accountability, make effective referrals, and prevent ongoing violent behaviors.

As we expand collaboration to develop programs and events, our efforts can create a community that works together to stop the cycle of violence. While any of these elements alone would be a positive step, they can have an even larger impact in combination. Our collective future will be better off due to the actions we take today.

It's easy to understand why we need to be more engaged. According to NCADV:

- An average of 20 people in the U.S. are physically abused by their intimate partners every minute.
- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men has been physically abused by an intimate partner.
- 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men has been severely physically abused by an intimate partner.
- 1 in 7 women and 1 in 18 men has been stalked.
- 1 in 3 female murder victims and 1 in 20 male murder victims was killed by an intimate partner.
- Intimate partner violence accounts for 15 percent of all violent crime.

These numbers are tragic, but it is important that we never forget that these are not just statistics. They are real victims—real people who live right down the street. They are families that are suffering. They are people who need us to get more engaged to ensure a safer future for our children, our grandchildren, and every member of the community.

The sheriff's role

As a profession, we are expected to respond to calls involving every sort of scenario that society can create. Typically, we get calls for help because the citizens that we serve don't know where else to turn and can't handle the situation by themselves. That is who we are.

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I'm proud to be part of NSA, because together we strive to serve and protect our counties, our states, and our nation with pride and honor. As we continue to push ourselves to be better, domestic violence is an area where we can boldly push our communities toward a safer future.

If not us, who? If not now, when? Our actions speak louder than words as we strive to make our communities safer while reducing law enforcement and civilian fatalities. As law enforcement leaders, we have an obligation to be proactive, and a duty to take action.

As sheriffs, the people have granted us unique responsibilities and the privilege of leadership. We can use our positions to lead positive change in our communities and inspire others to action. Consider taking some of these actions within your own communities. I know that our actions can make a difference—I am living proof. 🌟

Anoka County (Minnesota) Sheriff James Stuart serves on NSA's board and the executive board of the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association. A former Marine, Sheriff Stuart is a graduate of St. Mary's University and the 102nd session of the National Sheriffs' Institute. He was awarded NSA's Medal of Merit in 2015 and 2016 for his contributions to the community and the field of criminal justice.