



Recommendations from the Adult Violent Death Review Team 2022

The Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council was designated by the Harris County Commissioner's Court in August of 2003 to officially facilitate the Harris County Adult Death Review Team (AVDRT). Each month, AVDRT conducts system-wide reviews of selected cases, that have been adjudicated, of unexpected adult deaths that have been caused by intimate partner violence in the Houston/Harris County Area. At the end of each year, AVDRT generates recommendations gleaned from the information learned at the case reviews.

In 2022 the biggest challenge to the Team, was the backlog created due to the combination of Hurricane Harvey and Covid-19 and the length of time to review cases increased creating a further delay in creating a case list for review. In fact, the team reviewed all the cases possible from the Harris County Sheriff's Office by the fall. All the incidents from the cases reviewed occurred in either 2018 or 2019.

Recommendations

Create training opportunities for advocates that focus on crucial conversations with victims-

One trend that emerged was an increase in alleged victims being charged with killing their alleged abusers. The team felt the most important recommendation to attempt to increase safety, included creating training that shared the findings from the review team and using case studies to create conversations with advocates to explore the need to have sincere and frank conversations with victims around the consequences of choosing to stay with their harm doer. This includes highlighting safety planning for staying in relationships when there are high lethality indicators for future risk and harm. Additionally, this would include talking about the lethality for both parties involved in the relationship and the use of deadly tactics by victims to attempt to be safe from the harm doer. It is important for advocates to discuss consequences that include possible prosecution and prison time.

Increase Training for all Judges -After reviewing cases where family court judges either denied a protective order or weakened the terms of the order, or criminal court judges did not issue a Magistrate's Order of Emergency Protection or dismissed previous cases; it was determined that Judges needed more training related to domestic violence, risk and lethality, and how judicial decision making can increase safety for victims and accountability for offenders. This includes

the dynamics of domestic violence, the effects of witnessing domestic violence on children and the long-term effects of domestic violence on survivors, and use of evidence based risk assessment tools for judicial decision making.

Increase Training for Prosecutors – Several of the cases reviewed involved possible (undiagnosed) traumatic brain injuries (TBI). The team determined that prosecutors appeared to not have the basic information and training to understand the effects of TBI on victims of domestic violence. One prosecutor stated, “What is TBI?” There is need for providing training to increase knowledge about TBI as well as, the need for prosecutors to explore and investigate the entire history between the victim and the offender before making charging decisions. Additionally, if the victim and offender were juveniles or young adults, a review of school records should be conducted to gain insight to the history and/or any documentation of abuse. It also is further recommended that prosecutors contact the law enforcement investigator prior to taking a case to Grand Jury for a more thorough and detailed report of any additional information that might have been uncovered. Investigators often have critical pieces of information that can enhance the prosecutor’s ability to present a case and it needs to be communicated as soon as it is available.

Increase Training for Professionals in the Criminal Justice System- One of 2022’s recommendations relate to training Probation Officers to recognize the possibility that their clients could be a victim of domestic violence, assess for needs, conduct safety planning and provide referrals. HCDVCC provided training to the entire Harris County Probation Office staff in 2022 and is now part of the new employee orientation to provide ongoing training and support to the office. This year parole officers, juvenile probation officers and Children’s Protective Service caseworkers were added to that recommendation. It is also noted those three entities need better treatment options and follow through on the completion of treatment for people under their supervision.

Enhance training for Advocates- Advocates and volunteers that work the hotline at domestic violence agencies receive 40 hours of training and supervision before they answer their first call. The team recommends that advocate and volunteer training include information about asking about the mental health of the offender and if they have had any interaction with a third party for example, law enforcement, a judge, a counselor/therapist, a CPS caseworker, a probation/parole officer and was the outcome successful or not. This information could be useful when crafting a safety plan with a survivor including knowing the risks and how to form strategies around keeping the victim and their family safe.

Increase Training for the General Public- Often domestic violence does not take place behind closed doors. It can spill over to public spaces including parking lots, workplaces, churches, and gatherings. Many who witness domestic violence do not know how to intervene or even if they should do so. More bystander intervention training is needed to assist those bystanders in making smart and safe decisions about intervening. Training is also needed on the dynamics of domestic violence, healthy relationships, and resources. This training could help educate

prospective jurors to make educated decisions when deciding the outcome of domestic violence cases, as well as, provide family members and friends with information on how to help their loved ones. Additionally, Proprietary Schools who receive federal funding should abide by Title IX guidelines and provide information about domestic violence and referrals for their students. And lastly, there is the need for training of documenting information, including serial numbers, brand, type, and photos of all of their firearms. Most importantly, the need for reporting to the police when firearms have been stolen in a burglary of a car or a house. This could enhance the investigation into all homicides. In most of the cases reviewed, the origin of the firearm was never determined.

Enhance Intervention in the Investigation Process- Several of the cases reviewed had prior interaction with law enforcement and/or the District Attorney's Office. While recognizing both of these entities are overworked and understaffed, the need to treat domestic violence cases differently became obvious. First, advocates need to build a rapport with victims and not just treat them as a checklist to get through before moving on to the next case. Second, they need to make continued attempts to contact the victim by any means necessary. This means policy cannot dictate or limit the number of attempts to contact a victim and could include personal visits made with an investigator, especially for those who have repeated calls for service. And finally, the most important recommendation would be to try and minimize the time from incident to investigation to charging.

Create and Increase Investments in future Innovations and Technology- These last recommendations will require a tremendous investment of both time and money, and are needed in order to begin saving money through streamlining of information systems that reduce the amount of work required to develop case information. Implementation of a database/tracking system shared by the District Attorney's Office and all law enforcement agencies could go a long way toward saving time and increasing communication across systems that directly relates to more timely prosecution and increased victim safety. Such a system would include information about offenders, their previous encounters with law enforcement where charges were not filed, and any other information deemed necessary. It would also include information about services the survivor has received and who provided those services along with the contact information for the provider. Finally, our community needs to invest in primary prevention around domestic violence from an early age. Education and training are proven interventions that can prevent domestic violence and they can never start too early!