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## Police, advocates an effective team for helping domestic violence victims

by Sasha Aslanian, Minnesota Public Radio

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### AUDIO

Police, advocates an effective team for helping domestic violence victims (feature audio)

St. Paul, Minn. — When Mike Dollarschell arrives for work at the St. Paul Police Department, he scans the night's domestic violence reports for the worst cases, ones that demand intervention.

It doesn't take him long to find what he's looking for.

"He punched her in the face ... she passed out. He grabbed her by the throat," reads one report.

Dollarschell, a member of the department's Family and Sexual Violence Unit, looks for men who track down their ex-wives or ex-girlfriends, and who sometimes break into their homes and beat them -- the kind of chronic domestic violence that is most likely to turn lethal.

His partner isn't another officer, but domestic violence advocate Bree Adams Bill, who works for the non-profit St. Paul Intervention. The community agency, notified of all of the city's 13,000 annual domestic violence calls, provides services to victims.

Their visits are part of a program called "First Light," a key part of St. Paul's Blueprint for Safety that's become a national model for responding to domestic violence.

St. Paul will train more than a dozen cities and programs in Minnesota and around the country -- including Blue Earth, Brooklyn Park, Mankato, Minneapolis, Virginia and Winona -- in its five-year-old Blueprint for Safety later this year.

From the initial 911 call to the final outcome of the legal case, everyone from police to parole officers has two goals in mind: victim safety, and swift consequences for abusers.

"It is homicide prevention," Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said.

Pairing an officer with an advocate for battered women is unusual. Advocates and police don't always see eye-to-eye. Everything a victim says to an advocate is confidential and can't be used to help build the police case.

But they're both trying to build trust with the victim in the system.

### GONE ON ARRIVAL

Dollarschell and Adams Bill travel in a beat-up van.

Document: Risk assessment

"We don't go in a squad car or anything that really marks us as police officers," said Dollarschell, who wears plain clothes, with a bulletproof vest and gun underneath. Victims don't want to see another squad car, he explained, and the van helps them blend in with the neighborhood.

Dollarschell sets a stack of police reports on the dashboard. Topping their agenda is the man accused of punching the woman in the face. They have a warrant to arrest the man because the assault happened more than 24 hours earlier.

The two partners are particularly concerned about that case because the man grabbed the woman by the throat, and her injuries were bad enough that she went to the hospital.

"We don't know what that means yet, if he actually strangled her or what," Adams Bill said.

The details are important because if strangulation was involved, it could increase the severity of the charge from a misdemeanor to a felony.

This case is what's called a "gone on arrival."

Police and prosecutors focus on them because abusive men who flee before police arrive are considered to be some of the smartest and most dangerous offenders. Often, they avoid arrest and return to harm the woman.

In the past, when a suspect was not in custody, cases languished, causing a delay of up to 80 days before authorities filed charges. By focusing on those offenders, prosecutors have reduced the delay to an average of nine days.

The decrease in charging time on "gone on arrival cases" comes as a shock to other departments across the country, said Axel Henry, commander of the Family and Sexual Violence Unit.

"We literally are told they don't believe our figures," Henry said. "They're that fast -- and charging is up 50 percent."

The faster charging times show victims and offenders the crime is being taken seriously, Choi said.

"One of the things that I am a big believer in, is if the system is there for the victim immediately after an incident occurs, it is less likely that the victim would decide later that they don't want to participate in the prosecution," he said.

Document: Lethality checklist



Officer Mike Dollarschell

### YOUNG FELONS

Domestic homicide numbers haven't changed much since the Blueprint for Safety went into effect five years ago. They hover in the single digits each year but city officials and advocates credit First Light with saving lives.

Advocates say from the cases they're tracking, none of the 75 victims visited each month has been killed.

According to St. Paul Intervention, 75 percent of the highly lethal repeat chronic offenders targeted by First Light are charged. Of those, 100 percent are convicted.

Pat Kittridge, chief public defender for Ramsey County, questions the 100 percent conviction figure. But he said the Blueprint for Safety has escalated the pace and severity of charges many of his clients face.

"They have marshaled a lot of resources in this area, and the resources have all come on the prosecution end, on the police end, and they have given no additional resources to those of us who defend the people charged with these offenses," Kittridge.

He points out a young, immature offender can very quickly rack up three domestic abuse charges, and tougher laws now make that an automatic felony.

"We've created, or are going about creating a new class of very young felons, often young men of color who suffer the liability of having a felony conviction for the rest of their life at a very young age," he said.

### **SURPRISE ARREST**

Dollarschell and Adams Bill found the man they were looking for later that morning at the couple's apartment.

After calling another squad for back-up, Dollarschell tucks a bright yellow stun gun into the pocket of his cargo pants and heads into the apartment to help make the arrest.

A thin young man is escorted into the squad car parked behind the van.

"He was there; she was not," said Dollarschell as he climbed back into the van.

The man said his girlfriend may have taken the bus to the hospital, so Dollarschell and Adams Bill head there as well. Knowing only the woman's injuries, Dollarschell manages to find her inside.

The woman refuses to talk with him or cooperate. She tells him she and her boyfriend have worked things out.

However, she agrees to talk with the advocate. She signs a release for Adams Bill to bring a message to the police and the suspect: She didn't call the cops this morning.

Adams Bill decodes her message.

"Her fear is that he's thinking he's sitting in jail right now because of her," she explained. "And that she's going to pay for that again when he's released from jail."

Dollarschell and Adams Bill make it clear to victims and perpetrators that it's not the victim's choice to prosecute. That's up to local prosecutors enforcing state law. Dollarschell said his unit has found that it takes seven incidents for a woman to decide to leave.

Adams Bill points out that abused women may have reasons for staying and think leaving escalates their danger.

### **PALPABLE FEAR**

Another case on the partners' list shows just how dangerous it can be for abused women to try to leave.

The man they're looking for has four domestic violence-related offenses.

The night before the partners arrive, the man broke his ex-girlfriend's bedroom window. After she called 911, he ran. The responding officers flagged the case as one involving a chronic offender. During their relationship, he was convicted of four felonies for domestic assault, strangulation and violating no contact orders, records show.

When Dollarschell asks her to tell him about her relationship with the man, she seems jumpy. She fumbles for a cigarette and can't get the lighter to work.

The relationship started 10 years ago, said the woman, whom MPR News is not identifying. They broke up five years ago. She has repeatedly moved and changed her phone number, but he always manages to find her. He calls and texts her all night.

"Psycho stuff," the woman said.

She reaches for her phone and reads one in which the man called her a floozy and other things that can't be printed.

He breaks her windows. She worries her landlord will kick her out, so she moves.

She points to a long gash in the couch where Adams Bill is sitting. It's the only furniture in the room. He sliced it open.

He threatens to kill her.

She despairs that anyone can really help her.

Dollarschell wants her to obtain a restraining order and assures her that, this time, sheriff's deputies will find a way to serve him. He gathers information on the ex-boyfriend's living arrangements, his patterns, and his vehicle.

The woman tells Dollarschell and Adams Bill that the officers who responded to her call the night before restored her hope.

Back in the van, Dollarschell sums up the team's assessment of the case, first reported as a broken window and a suspect fleeing into the night. He said the partners learned a lot by going there.

"They could easily charge this case, put a warrant out on him. We can go grab him on that. She gets an order tomorrow, we're good to go. ... Then anytime this happens from now on, it will be felony level," Dollarschell said. "There's ways we can take care of things, and which these people don't know, because for 10 years she thinks that the police and the prosecutors have failed her."

Minnesota Domestic Violence Crisis Line: 1-866-223-1111

St. Paul Intervention: 651-645-2824