

**BELLINGHAM-WHATCOM COUNTY  
COMMISSION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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**A REPORT FROM THE 2002  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SAFETY  
AND ACCOUNTABILITY AUDIT**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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February 2003

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission Against Domestic Violence provided the vision, leadership and coordination for Whatcom County's first Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audit.

The Safety Audit would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of two key Whatcom County law enforcement agencies and leaders:

*Dale Brandland, Whatcom County Sheriff  
Randall Carroll, Bellingham Police Chief*

The Safety Audit Team contributed countless hours of time to conduct the Audit.

*Natalia Calhoun, Lummi Victims of Crime  
Greg DePaul, Lt., Whatcom County Jail  
Janet Davis, Whatcom County Health Department  
Caryl Dunavan, Opportunity Council  
Colin Emmett, Sgt., Bellingham Police Department  
Matt Iverson, What-Comm  
Kevin McFadden, Sgt., Whatcom County Sheriff's Office  
April Mitchelson, Ofc., Bellingham Police Department  
Peggy Miller, District Court Probation  
Sue Parrott, Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission Against DV  
Scott Rossmiller, Sgt., Whatcom County Sheriff's Office  
Mac Setter, Whatcom County Prosecutor's Office  
Sheila Slocum, Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services  
Pete Smiley, Bellingham City Attorney's Office  
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Audit text analysis would not have been possible without support from the following:

*Kathy Balmat, Bellingham Police Department  
Joan DeFries, Whatcom County Sheriff's Office  
Jessica Myran, Praxis International*

**Funding for the Safety Audit was provided by:**  
***Bellingham Sunrise Rotary  
City of Bellingham  
ConocoPhillips  
Whatcom County***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **A Report from the 2002 Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audit**

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission Against Domestic Violence was created by City of Bellingham and Whatcom County ordinances in December 1998. The Commission, which is comprised of twenty-seven key community leaders, is charged with a mission to *provide leadership in the community's effort to reduce and prevent domestic violence*. The Commission conducted a Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audit in October 2002, believing that it was a critical step in identifying and implementing specific criminal justice system changes that would improve victim safety and offender accountability.

The Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audit (Safety Audit) refers to the process developed in Duluth, Minnesota, by Ellen Pence, Ph.D. The Safety Audit is a systematic observation and analysis of work routines and documents used and produced between and among institutions as they process “cases” of domestic abuse. The purpose of a Safety Audit is to see how, where, and if existing practices – those that are documented in forms or policies, or those that evolve within a work culture – ensure the safety of victims and the accountability of offenders.

The Domestic Violence Commission chose to focus Whatcom County's first Safety Audit on What-Comm, the county-wide telecommunications center, the Bellingham Police Department (BPD), the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) and the Whatcom County Jail. The Audit was supported and received full cooperation from the Bellingham Police Chief and Whatcom County Sheriff, who together oversee the four systems.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The Safety Audit has six distinct steps: (1) forming and preparing an inter-agency Audit team; (2) determining which aspects of case processing the team will investigate; (3) determining the scope of the investigation; (4) collecting data from each point of institutional action on a case, including the relationship between the data produced at different points of intervention; (5) analyzing the data; and (6) preparing findings that lead to specific recommendations. The Audit team then looks at a sequence of actions and determines how or if that sequence is structured to centralize both victim safety and offender accountability. Safety Audits look at the context of agency intervention, such as information-sharing mechanisms between agencies, the education of and training available to agency staff, and the resources those staff have available. In so doing, the Audit reveals work processes underlying any problems or trends.

A trained sixteen-member Audit team (see Appendix A) conducted the Safety Audit during the week of October 21 – 25, 2002. During that week the Audit team held twelve interviews and participated in forty-three observations of practitioners in the four audited systems. In addition,

the Safety Audit consultant conducted text analysis of over 245 files, randomly selected from What-Comm, BPD, WCSO and the Whatcom County Jail. Two focus groups were held with domestic violence victims/survivors and service providers prior to the Audit week.

The Audit team met over the morning on the last day of the Safety Audit week to review its findings and develop preliminary recommendations. Each team prepared a set of recommendations that were then presented to their colleagues for review and comment. Appendix B contains the 42 preliminary recommendations made by the Audit team. The Audit team recommended several changes that involve systemic problems beyond the immediate response to domestic violence. They are included in the preliminary recommendations because they have an impact on the attention and resources available to victim safety.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Safety Audit produced a considerable amount of information specific to domestic violence case processing in Whatcom County. The final report supplements the Audit team findings with additional information from the text analysis. It highlights the thirty key findings and sixty-six recommendations, which are listed in summary form in Appendix F. The report focuses on gaps in victim safety and offender accountability because these are the areas where change should occur. It is important, however, to also acknowledge the qualities and features already in place. That practitioners and systems are willing to examine their own processes is evident in the composition and enthusiasm of the Audit team. They approached their work with energy and curiosity and found their colleagues eager to contribute to the process.

These are some key Safety Audit findings.

- **Inconsistent system responses.**  
Inconsistencies appear to be caused by a number of factors, such as absence of written policies and procedures, lack of training and lack of clarity between systems regarding who is responsible for communicating and requesting information.
- **Risk/danger evaluation is inconsistent and incomplete.**  
Although most law enforcement reports included general questions about abuse, many reports appeared to be missing deeper questions to better assess how dangerous the current situation is, how it compares to previous acts of violence, and what implications this has for victim safety and establishing probable cause.
- **Reports are frequently missing victim contact information, witness and suspect statements and information on the presence and welfare of children.**
- **Victim information and support is inconsistent and should be enhanced to provide links to more immediate crisis services.**
- **Deputies/Officers often respond to the scene with limited information on criminal histories and the existence of orders.**  
This is caused by lack of clarity on the role of dispatch in checking records, the lack of 24- hour record access within WCSO as well as lag time in entering records, and the lack of shared data systems between jurisdictions.
- **For incidents classified as “verbal domestic” (no arrest), the dispatch slip and/or report frequently suggest a level of violence or threatening conduct that may support a higher degree of intervention.**

- **System practitioners lack consistent access to technology/resources such as cell phones, lap top computers, 24-hour access to records, and cross-jurisdictional access to records. (These vary by agency.)**
- **Victim notification prior to offender release from jail occurs inconsistently, and in some cases, the jail does not receive adequate victim contact information.**

Civil and criminal justice systems have the potential to deter future violence, if the response is quick, clear, consistent, and linked to strong community-based services for victims and offenders. Victim safety can be compromised when information is lost, cues are missed, information is not documented and shared with appropriate practitioners, or when interventions do not account for the potential for retaliatory violence. The findings above demonstrate areas in which Whatcom County can improve its policies and practices in order to build an even stronger response to ensure victim safety and offender accountability.

Each Safety Audit finding in the report is followed by a series of recommendations. As documented in the Safety Audit Preliminary Recommendations (Appendix A), the recommendations fall into seven categories: technology, resources, rules and regulations, administrative forms and procedures, systems linkages, education and training, and social status assumptions. Here are examples from the Safety Audit recommendations:

**Technology:**

- Provide the means for WCSO Deputies to compose and record reports electronically.
- Provide Longarm and criminal history access via BPD patrol MDT and link Longarm (BPD report data base) with the AS400 (WCSO database).
- Require mandatory completion of domestic violence booking screen at the jail.

**Resources:**

- Develop pocket cards or similar cue cards to aid What-Comm staff in assessing safety and gathering information.
- Enter domestic violence reports into the AS400 (WCSO electronic database) by the next business day.
- Provide a cell phone or similar technology with Language Line access for every BPD patrol vehicle.

**Rules and Regulations:**

- Develop written What-Comm policies and procedures to guide staff and ensure consistency of response to domestic violence calls.
- Review the overall WCSO response to “verbal domestics” including review of required paperwork to identify areas for possible consolidation and streamlining.
- Design and implement a BPD departmental policy governing response to domestic abuse calls and train officers and supervisors department-wide.
- Provide training to jail staff about the significance of relaying threats and excited-utterance information to the prosecutor and other appropriate parties.

**Administrative Forms and Procedures:**

- Provide training and policy guidance to WCSO deputies about appropriate techniques for inquiring about children’s presence and welfare.
- Provide training and policy guidance to BPD officers about the significance of and techniques for obtaining witness and suspect statements in domestic violence cases.

- Incorporate risk questions into BPD and WCSO report writing requirements and forms and provide ongoing supervisory review and feedback to patrol/deputies.
- Require victim contact information from the arresting officers prior to booking in jail.
- Review all correspondence, telephone scripts, and other program materials to ensure that victims are fully informed of Community Volunteers Against Domestic Violence (CVADV) role and relationship to law enforcement agencies.

#### **System Linkages:**

- Clarify the role and relationship between law enforcement and What-Comm dispatch to articulate who initiates and communicates information such as weapons check, criminal history, and verification of orders.
- Provide WCSO deputies with reader privileges for Longarm (BPD report data base).
- Law enforcement to inform victims of available domestic violence crisis services and offer to make a connection for them while on-scene.
- Improve jail linkages to domestic violence services in order to strengthen connections between victims and sources of information, assistance and support.

#### **Education and Training:**

- Design and deliver agency-wide training to What-Comm staff.
- Provide guidelines and training to WCSO and BPD about investigating possible strangulation and offering medical attention.
- Provide training to jail corrections officers about the dynamics of domestic violence and batterer tactics of control.

#### **Social Status Assumptions:**

- Provide support for CVADV to serve non-English speaking victims, via recruitment of bilingual volunteers, access to phone-based or other translation services, and translation of victim notification materials into other languages.
- Working backward from jail booking records, use Safety Audit methodology to examine arrest of women on domestic abuse related charges in order to identify any problematic practices concerning victim safety.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Accountability means holding offenders responsible for their use of violence. It means creating and monitoring a coordinated community response that offers the promise of safety to victims of domestic violence. Accountability also means holding community systems accountable, which is what the participating agencies in Whatcom County have done with this Safety Audit. Four key criminal justice systems have been willing to take a look at themselves and determine, how, where, and if their current practices ensure victim safety and offender accountability.

This Safety Audit Report is a blueprint for change. Implementation of the recommendations will require commitment, prioritization and resources. The Commission is committed to supporting implementation of these recommendations and hopes to continue the audit process in future years by focusing on additional criminal justice systems as well as other agencies that form the community response to domestic violence.