

La Crosse County Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audit Findings and Recommendations – Summary

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Background

La Crosse County has a twenty-year legacy of changing community response to domestic violence. In 2004, in this spirit and tradition of “challenge and change,” the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP) and its partners initiated a Safety and Accountability Audit. Just as it was a pioneer in exploring coordinated community response, La Crosse County is the first community in Wisconsin to initiate a Safety Audit.² This approach was selected as an avenue for refreshing the mission, purpose, and function of our coordinated community response, beginning with 911, patrol, and the Domestic Abuse Reduction Team (DART).

The Safety Audit looks at how work routines and ways of doing business strengthen or impede safety for victims of battering. Its focus is on institutional processes, not individual workers. A trained local team conducts interviews and observations with practitioners who are skilled and well-versed in their jobs. Their knowledge of the institutional response in everyday practice and their first-hand experience with the people whose cases are being processed supply many of the critical observations and insights of the audit. A third element of data collection is review of case files, policies, and other documents.

In a Safety Audit, the constant focal point is the *gap* between what people experience and need and what institutions provide. At the center of the inquiry is the effort to see the gap from a victim’s position, and to see how it is produced by case management practices. In doing so, we simultaneously discover how to solve it. Recommendations then link directly to the creation of new standardizing practices, such as new rules, policies, procedures, forms, and training.

The La Crosse team included a coordinator from DVIP and representatives from the La Crosse County Sheriff’s Department, La Crosse Police Department, Onalaska Police Department, La Crosse County Emergency Services, Domestic Abuse Reduction Team, New Horizons Shelter

¹ The grant supported DART; increased services to underserved populations, specialized training for judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, and victim advocates; and the Safety Audit.

² Praxis International, Inc., (218) 525-0487; www.praxisinternational.org.

and Women's Center, Franciscan Skemp Healthcare, and Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center, with assistance from Praxis International.

The Safety Audit explored the following question, developed from focus group discussions, a previous survey of victims who had received DART services, and the team's own experiences as interveners in domestic assault cases:

How is safety for victims of domestic violence in La Crosse County built in to law enforcement response and other community intervention initiated by a call to 911?

We launched our work with a community forum presentation on September 2, 2004. Between then and August 2005, team members conducted 3 community focus groups, 82 individual interviews, and 41 observations of various practitioners in their work settings, such as the 911 center and patrol ride-alongs. We analyzed 25 emergency calls, 56 incident reports from six jurisdictions, and policies, protocols, information packets, and forms. We met for six debriefing sessions.

Recognizing a strong foundation

Throughout the Safety Audit we saw the strong foundation of coordinated community response that has been built in La Crosse County. Nine different agencies contributed personnel and staff time to a twelve-month process. Agencies throughout the county cooperated in setting up interviews, providing time for observations, and sharing tapes, reports, and case files.

There is broad participation in the DVIP and on DART. An effort is made to look at every one of the roughly 1800 domestic abuse-related incidents reported to law enforcement each year and determine what level of intervention would best promote safety. Written policies are in place across law enforcement agencies, acknowledging domestic violence as a crime and providing direction to officers. Patrol officers routinely contact New Horizons in an effort to make a timely link between a victim and advocacy services. Practitioners routinely call on one another to strategize about how best to respond to concerns about safety and accountability in specific cases.

During the Safety Audit we encountered frequent examples of actions that made a difference for individual victims. Early on, in the pre-audit planning work, some of us heard a 911 call where quick thinking helped guard the caller's safety when the assailant got on the phone. Officers in another case took time to consult with a prosecutor about arrest charges that might provide additional breathing room for a woman who was *scared for her life*, and they acknowledged to her and her son that *we knew it was a tough night for them*³. Focus group participants spoke of the importance of DART support in providing ongoing contact and a cell phone, attending court hearings, and keeping them informed of probation revocation actions: [The DART advocate] *let me know when and where he was*. For another woman, *before DART, there was really nothing that was so supportive*.

³ Throughout this summary, quotations from focus group participants, 911 calls, incident reports, and interviews appears in *italics*.

It is critical to recognize this foundation. A community without this base and commitment does not bother to ask how things are working for victims of battering.

Discovering gaps

We also discovered some gaps in the fabric of safety that La Crosse County has been weaving. Our findings center on eight aspects of safety that need additional attention in order to provide the most flexible safety-driven and victim-oriented response possible. The table at the end of this report presents a snapshot of the gaps, types of changes that might be required to close them, and the variety of practitioners and community members that might be at the table when crafting solutions. The full report develops and presents each gap in detail.

Closing these gaps begins with La Crosse County's strengths and will draw on our longstanding relationships and coordinated community response, as well as the audit team's new experience with the Safety Audit's tools. It will involve a variety of changes in rules and regulations; administrative practices; resources; concepts and theories; linkages; mission, purpose, and function; accountability; and, education and training. It will involve community members and practitioners, from victims and survivors of battering, advocates, and DART members, to 911 operators, patrol officers, agency administrators, DVIP, prosecutors, and others who can help think through ways of closing these gaps, with a minimum of unintended negative consequences for victims of battering and their children.

Asking questions from the standpoint of a victim of battering is a key principle in the Safety Audit design. We constantly ask how our interventions take into account her⁴ whole experience. With that in mind, we conclude with brief descriptions of some of the violence reported in the cases we reviewed, drawn from the experiences of multiple victims of battering in La Crosse County.

[He] grabbed her and pushed her around ...knocked the television over along with a floor lamp and potted plant ...he did not care about any restraining orders that [she] might get and threatened to kill her if she went to the police...put his hand around her throat and took a kitchen knife from the "knife block" where he held it to her throat and said, "Do you want to die, are you scared?"... grabbed her by her feet and pulled her out of bed onto the floor...told [her] "I'll kill you."... [He] grabbed her by the throat with both of his hands and started choking her...told her that "I'm going to cut off your windpipe...[He] has choked her before but this was the hardest he has ever choked he... Get him out of here, before it gets any more escalated...[I don't need medical] not yet anyway, but if you don't hurry ...He's never been known to hit me like that or throw me around...he's getting really out of hand ...He grabbed her by the throat and threw her to the floor...pushed her down, put his knee in her abdomen, and hit her... He pinches and

⁴ Both men and women use violence in intimate relationships, although how that occurs and the consequences differ greatly. Information from police reports, emergency room visits, counseling centers, divorce courts, and community social service agencies points to a significant gender disparity in who initiates violence, who is more physically harmed, and who seeks safety. Women are far more likely to be victims of battering and men more likely to be the perpetrators. Some of the language in this summary and the report reflects that reality.

squeezes me very hard, leaving bruises and finger marks, but always in areas that do not show... My husband is threatening to kill me...He grabbed me by the throat and threw me down... [My child] is scared to death...He said he was going to come back and kill her...He didn't care if he goes to prison or not, but he will take care of them...bruises...swelling to the neck...broken wrist...many visible injuries...bruise marks from [his] fingers...possible broken arm...finger print impressions were noted on [her] neck area

Some of these women received a full measure of intervention and support; for others it was less certain. There is no single, universal response that will meet everyone's circumstances. Rather, it is the act of weaving an understanding of safety within and through the community response that might make a difference. Safety is a state of being – of being free, from danger, risk, and injury. It is not dependent upon someone's judgment of worthiness, or deservingness. It means acknowledging the right to be free from danger, risk, and injury, regardless of character or compliance with expectations of how a "good victim" should act. Coordinated community response has always offered the promise of safety, of action that will prevent someone from experiencing further harm at the hands of an intimate partner. It requires asking: Who is doing what, to whom, and with what impact and to what degree? What are the likely implications of our intervention actions? How does our action in individual cases affect the overall use of violence in our community?

The Safety Audit has revealed gaps that impede safety for some victims of battering in La Crosse County, and suggested ways to close them. The next step is to launch the broad discussions and problem-solving that will refresh the mission, purpose, and function of each system, agency, and worker that is a part of our community response to battering and abuse.

Key Findings from the La Crosse County Domestic Violence Safety & Accountability Audit

A strong foundation:

20+ years of coordinated community response, partnership, and commitment to building safety for victims of battering

Discovering gaps:	Rules & regulations	Administrative practices	Resources	Concepts & theories	Linkages	Mission, purpose, & function	Accountability	Education & training	Who should be involved? (But not limited to...)
	What kind of change might close this gap?								
1) Many victims of battering receive multiple contacts and packets of information from multiple interveners, without a clear understanding of interveners' various roles or the accuracy of the information.		√			√				Victims and survivors of battering, DVIP, DART, New Horizons, hospitals, 911
2) Some victims receive incomplete information about operating emergency cell phones.		√			√			√	DVIP, DART, New Horizons, Hospitals
3) Response to domestic violence incidents does not thoroughly account for the complexity of risk and safety for victims of battering from different social positions.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	Victims and survivors, DVIP, DART, New Horizons, 911, patrol officers, agency administrators, community organizations, CCR, participants in national dialogue on issue
4) Understanding and methods of determining "primary physical aggressor" vary among law enforcement officers in La Crosse County.	√	√		√		√	√	√	Victims and survivors, patrol officers, shift commanders, administrators, DA, New Horizons CCR, DVIP, DART, participants in national dialogue on issue
5) Key aspects of safety and danger assessment are inconsistently applied or have not been well-developed in the 911 and initial law enforcement response.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	Victims and survivors, patrol officers, shift commanders, administrators, DA, New Horizons CCR, DVIP, DART, participants in national dialogue on issue
6) Information about the presence and well-being of children and teens is inconsistent in 911 calls and patrol reports.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	Victims and survivors, 911, patrol officers and supervisors, New Horizons, DART, DVIP, Child Advocacy Center, participants in national dialogue on issue
7) It is unclear that DART intervention consistently reaches victims of battering who are most at risk of ongoing violence, intimidation, and coercion.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	Victims and survivors, DART, New Horizons, patrol officers, DVIP
8) Intervening agencies do not consistently produce statistical information that contributes to an accurate understanding of reported domestic violence incidents.	√	√	√		√				Law enforcement agencies, 911, DVIP, DART, New Horizons, hospitals

See complete report for a detailed discussion of these and other findings.