



St. Paul has new blueprint for tackling domestic abuse

First-of-its kind plan will get better information, coordinate efforts.

By **CHAO XIONG**, Star Tribune

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Following new procedures intended to revolutionize domestic abuse cases, a St. Paul police officer recently asked a beating victim if her boyfriend had ever hurt animals.

Instantly animated, she told the officer how the suspect had put her daughter's cat in a pillow case and repeatedly smashed it against a wall until it died and then held it up, saying she could have been the target of his attack.

Her response to questions included in the city's new Blueprint for Safety, immediately elevated the seriousness of the incident, said Sgt. Axel Henry. The program, unveiled Thursday and described by officials as the first comprehensive effort of its kind, aims at getting multiple agencies to better coordinate their abuse prevention efforts, ask more questions about the suspect's level of anger and violence and move more quickly to issue charges and arrest warrants.

Officials said the blueprint will help police, prosecutors and victim's advocates do a better job of keeping domestic disputes from turning deadly, as in Sunday's death of Svetlana Vladimirovna Munt. She was allegedly shot seven times by her ex-husband following a bitter divorce and custody battle over their children, who witnessed the killing.

"We're working smarter, and more effectively," said St. Paul City Attorney John Choi. "I really believe that the work that we're doing is homicide prevention."

Blueprint for Safety was designed so that other agencies can adopt its practices, officials said. It has drawn attention from scores of agencies and advocacy groups across the state and country. Thursday's official debut was attended by Catherine Pierce, acting director of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women.

'Gone on arrival'

"It's very exciting," said Pierce. "They have not left a single stone unturned."

Blueprint for Safety outlines new procedures

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for multiple St. Paul, Ramsey County and advocacy agencies in working together to combat domestic abuse. 911 dispatchers will be trained to take more accurate information about the crime and a suspect's history, and relay that to police so they can respond accordingly. Police will ask victims and their children more questions to better assess a suspect's threat level, among other measures.

Police also will work with Choi's office the morning after a domestic abuse call in which the suspect has fled -- called "gone on arrival" cases -- and charges and arrest warrants will be filed as soon as possible. They make up about 75 percent of the city's domestic abuse cases, with an average of eight occurring each night.

Before the blueprint was established, heavy caseloads meant it could take weeks or even months for the city attorney's office to charge a domestic abuse suspect if the suspect was "gone on arrival," Choi said. That sent the message to victims that their safety wasn't a priority, and relayed to offenders that they wouldn't be held accountable for their actions, Choi said.

Since some aspects of the blueprint were implemented earlier this year, the average

charging time for such cases has dropped from 30 to nine days.

A call for reform

Work on the blueprint began in 2006 when longtime domestic abuse advocate Ellen Pence, director of the antiviolence nonprofit Praxis International, and retired Ramsey County Court Judge Mary Louise Klas together asked city officials to reform the domestic abuse criminal justice system. The city obtained a \$500,000 grant from the state in 2007, and studied its handling of domestic abuse cases across multiple agencies. Praxis helped the city build a new plan for dealing with such cases, and more than 1,200 law enforcement officials, advocates and others have undergone blueprint training.

"They've really come to understand that it's one process," Klas said of the multiple agencies. "It's a kind of organic process that needs to have everyone in that process understand his or her responsibility in relation to everybody else's responsibility. Definitely it will save lives."

Other changes under the blueprint include better communication across agencies, and requiring offenders who are bailed out of jail to meet the next day with Project Remand, a

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nonprofit that provides pre-trial service. Project Remand will help offenders review their conditions of release, which often mandate no contact with victims. Previously, such conditions were reviewed just before offenders were released. Advocates said that was poor timing because offenders were so eager to leave jail they couldn't focus on the conditions of release.

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