

Hi-Line's Help for Abused Spouses



800.219.7336 or 406.278.3342

Handling a Domestic Violence Call: Dispatch

Adapted from New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice - Handling a Domestic Violence Call In-Service Training for Police Dispatchers: Instructor Manual

Introduction

Domestic violence is a very serious problem. It is a crime. Domestic violence is responsible for more injuries to women than any other reason, exceeding injuries due to rape, mugging, and traffic accidents combined. In some cases, battering escalates to homicide and suicide. The FBI reports that a woman is battered every 12 seconds in this country. Some reports indicate that more than half of all American women will experience some form of violence from their spouses during marriage.¹ Around 4.8 million women are physically and sexually abused each year.² Many of the abused women are beaten as frequently as once a month, once a week, or even daily.³ Per the Violence Policy Center website, in 2019, of the 1,795 women murdered in 2019, 9 out of 10 were killed by someone they knew. About 62% were murdered by a spouse or someone with whom they had been intimate.

Domestic violence creates a significant threat to children in the home. Children in homes of domestic violence are 15 times more likely to be abused or neglected than children in peaceful homes.⁴ Children may be affected psychologically. Some studies indicate that between 53 and 70% of men who abuse women also abuse their children and a significant number sexually abuse the children, especially daughters. A son who sees his father beat his mother is more likely to become a delinquent or a batterer himself than if his father beat him instead.⁵ Clinical data indicates that boys will use violence to resolve conflicts and girls will see abuse as an integral part of a close relationship.⁶

Violence in the home has a ripple effect. It affects every day lives, imperils jobs, infects the workplace, ruins leisure time and educational opportunities.⁷ Law enforcement officers have an opportunity to stop the escalation of violence in the home. By enforcing the domestic violence laws, the officer provides the most effective deterrent to future abuse.

The police dispatcher has an important role in a domestic violence call. Oftentimes, the dispatcher is the first person the victim of domestic violence calls for assistance. What and how a dispatcher responds to the victim's call may affect the safety of the victim and children, if there are any in the household. The 911 taped conversation between the dispatcher and the caller may be vital evidence in a later prosecution of the batterer.

The police dispatcher also is the vital link between the victim and the responding police officers. The officers responding to the scene must be able to depend upon the information the dispatchers provide the officers. At times, the safety of both the victim and the responding officers will depend on what the dispatcher says or does.

The Dispatcher's Response

The dispatcher who receives a domestic violence call should dispatch officers to every reported incident. When warranted, the dispatcher should give a domestic violence call the same priority as any other life threatening call. Whenever possible, two officers should be dispatched to the scene.

A dispatcher should not ask the victim whether he or she wants to "prosecute," "press charges" or "sign a complaint." Any comment which places the responsibility for enforcement of the law with the victim is inappropriate.⁸

The dispatcher who receives a domestic violence call should try to elicit from the caller and relay to the responding officers as much information as possible.

A law enforcement communication system should have standard operating procedures for receiving emergency calls from non-English speaking and from deaf or hard of hearing persons. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that a law enforcement communications system be equipped with a TTY (teletypewriter) to accommodate emergency calls from deaf or hard of hearing persons.

The dispatcher must always keep in mind that a person calling the police department to report a domestic violence dispute may be in a highly emotional state and may not provide all of the necessary information or may minimize the seriousness of the incident. The dispatcher must try to calm the person down and ask the necessary questions to obtain the needed information.

Receiving and Dispatching a Call

A. During a call for assistance, the dispatcher should ask the following questions:

1. Where is the emergency?
 - What address?
 - What apartment number?
2. Who am I speaking to?
3. What has happened?
4. Has anyone been injured?
 - If yes, is an ambulance needed?
5. Are you the victim?
 - If no, are you a witness?
6. Is the suspect present?
 - What is his/her name?
 - Please describe the suspect.
 - If the suspect is not present, where does the caller believe the suspect is.
 - What does the suspect look like: race, gender, clothing.
 - What time did the suspect leave the scene?
7. Are weapons involved?
 - If yes, what kind?
8. Is the suspect under the influence of drugs or alcohol?
 - If yes, what substance?
9. Are children present?
 - If yes, how many? How old?
10. Are other people present?
 - If yes, how many?
11. Have the police been to this address before?
 - If yes, how many times?
 - When was the last time?
12. Does the victim have a current restraining order?

13. A telephone number where the caller can be called back.⁹

B. The safety of the domestic violence victim must be the primary concern of the dispatcher. Ask if they can speak freely. "Code" talk may be necessary. The dispatcher should advise the victim to ensure for his or her safety. For example, the dispatcher may suggest that the victim wait for the officers at a neighbor's house or remain on the telephone line.

C. The dispatcher should listen for background noises during the telephone conversation, such as:

- screams
- shouts
- threats
- breaking glass and furniture

D. The dispatcher should check the cross-reference file of incidents by name and address to determine:

1. if there had been previously reported incidents involving the same parties.
2. whether weapons had been used previously, and
3. whether any injuries had been reported in the earlier incidents.

E. The dispatcher should determine whether there are any outstanding court orders issued involving the parties by checking the statewide domestic violence registry.

F. Where the responding officers have been denied entry into the premises of a domestic violence incident, the officers may ask the dispatcher to call the complainant to confirm the earlier report. In such cases, the dispatcher must be alert to signs that a dangerous condition exists.

1. At times, the dispatcher should not ask the victim direct questions if there is a possibility that the assailant had threatened the victim to now report that the earlier call was a mistake. Indirect questioning may permit the victim to obtain the needed police assistance.
2. One technique for confirming that the victim had called for police assistance but is now being threatened by the batterer is to ask the victim to select a number between one and five if the victim wants the police to enter the premises and assist the victim. If the victim selects such a number, the victim has given the police indirect permission to enter the premises and to render assistance to the victim.

G. If the suspect answers the return call, the dispatch should establish neutral ground to help de-escalate the situation.

H. If the caller is disconnected, attempt to call back and send officers to the scene. Do not cancel law enforcement response. The officer should do a welfare check of all present at the scene to determine if a crime was committed.

Case 1

Caller states that there is a family fight going on at 555 Crooked Lane.

- Some people speak in general terms. The dispatcher must attempt to determine what the caller means by “family fight.” In some cases, the caller may expound on this conclusion. For example, the caller may say that a woman at the scene is screaming. Upon further questioning, the caller may add that the woman is screaming that she not be stabbed or shot. This type of detailed information is important for the responding officers. The officers could then be prepared to confront a person with a weapon instead of just loud and abusive language. Through detailed questioning, the dispatcher may have saved the lives of the responding officers.

Case 2

Caller states that she is being beaten by her husband.

- Here again, the victim may be speaking in general terms. It is the dispatcher’s responsibility to determine what the caller really means. How is she being beaten? While the general conclusion is that when the word “beaten” is used it means physically beaten. However, this may not be true. A person can be beaten with an object, such as a baseball bat or a fireplace poker. Sometimes, a person will not accurately state the problem. Perhaps, the victim means to convey that she is being assaulted with a knife. The dispatcher must constantly keep in mind that a caller may be in a highly emotional state and may not accurately state the problem. A skilled dispatcher, however, may be able to determine the nature of the problem and to inform the responding officers so that they can be prepared.

Case 3

A woman calls stating that her husband is threatening her.

- The dispatcher must determine how the husband is threatening her. Is he threatening her with a weapon? If so, what type of weapon? Where is the weapon? Are there other people in the room? Has the husband been drinking or taking drugs?

Case 4

A child calls hysterically reporting that her daddy is killing her mother.

- Here, the skill of the dispatcher is important. The dispatcher must methodically and patiently attempt to obtain detailed information from a young child who is witnessing a shocking event in the child’s young life: the child’s father is “killing” the child’s mother. The child is seeing and hearing two people the child loves and depends on in a life threatening struggle. The dispatcher must obtain from the child the details of what the child concludes is “killing.” Is a weapon involved? Is the father drunk? Have both parents been drinking? Has the mother been injured? Where does the child live?

1 National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Facts on Domestic Violence (1993)

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *Understanding Intimate Partner Violence* (PDF)

3 Joan Zorza, *The Criminal Law of Misdemeanor Domestic Violence, 1970-1990*, 83 *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 46 (1992)

4 *Id.*, citing National Woman Abuse Prevention Project, Effects of Domestic Violence on Children (undated fact sheet) (on file with Sen. Com. on Judiciary)

5 *Id.* citing various sources for statistics

6 Elena Salzman, *The Quincy District Court Domestic Violence Prevention Program: A Model Legal Framework for Domestic Violence Intervention*, 74 *Boston University Law Review* 329, 1994

7 See footnote 2, citing National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Protection Orders: Legislation, Current Court Practice, and Enforcement 4 (1990)

8 *Domestic Violence Protocol for Law Enforcement 1994*, Police Chiefs' Association of Santa Clara County

9 *Id.*; WASPC Model Operating Procedures for Law Enforcement Response to Domestic Violence and Resource Guidelines; Domestic Violence, model domestic violence policy, International Association of Chiefs of Police