

# MEDIA GUIDE

## INFORMATION AND RESOURCES FOR REPORTING ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE and DV-RELATED HOMICIDES

Domestic violence (DV) is a deeply complex issue to explain, and the media play an important role in reporting its facts accurately to news consumers, especially at times of great family and community tragedy. The Ohio Domestic Violence Network (ODVN) offers this media guide to assist reporters, copywriters, headline writers, editors and producers and to support your coverage of this issue and its broad impact. In this media guide you will find: 10 Things to Know About DV; Pitfalls to Avoid; Suggestions for Broadening the Storyline; and Local, State and National Resources. We greatly appreciate the assistance of Jane Doe Inc. (The Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence) for permission to adapt its materials.

### 10 Things to Know About DV

1	Domestic violence is rarely an isolated incident. Whether outwardly visible or not, domestic violence is identified by <b>an established pattern of coercive control</b> of one partner over the other. Power is held by the abuser, fear is experienced by the victim.
2	Batterers' <b>tactics are usually broader than physical violence</b> and threats of physical violence. Regularly reported tactics include: stalking and extreme monitoring of a victim's activities and communications; sexual abuse including marital rape; social isolation; threats of suicide; threats or actual abuse against children, other family members and pets; financial abuse; withholding access to money, transportation or medical services; interference with a victim's work or education; emotional and psychological abuse; and utilizing systems such as child welfare, law enforcement, courts and immigration as threats against a victim.
3	Domestic violence is <b>perpetrated by batterers across all socio-economic classes and cultures</b> . The impact of class and culture on domestic violence is significant in terms of creating additional barriers to safety, resources available to victims and responses to perpetrators.
4	Domestic violence occurs in <b>all types of relationships, heterosexual or homosexual</b> .
5	Males can be victims, although because this is much more rare, services are accessed to a much lesser degree by male victims. Most <b>DV programs do provide victim services, support and emergency shelter to males as well as females</b> .

6	<b>Research does not support substance abuse, mental illness or economic hardship as causes of domestic violence</b> , though each of these may also be present in a case.
7	<b>Separation or leaving is the deadliest time</b> in domestic violence. Risk for serious injury and deaths are escalated for the victim, children, other family members, bystanders, co-workers, friends, companions, partners, and the batterer. Leaving, calling law enforcement, emergency shelter and protection orders may or may not make a victim safer.
8	<b>Separation is a process.</b> Consider where in the process a victim may be/have been in leaving or ending a relationship: enrolling in school, making an appointment with an attorney, seeking an order of protection, attending counseling or a support group, entering a new relationship.
9	<b>Domestic violence is gender-based violence.</b> Women are considerably more victimized than men. Women are much more likely to be killed by a current or former partner than by a stranger. Male domestic homicide victims are most frequently killed by men. Male victims are often friends, family members or new partners of the victim.
10	<b>Domestic violence is a community problem</b> as much as it is an isolated family problem. It impacts community safety, healthcare, criminal justice, court dockets, state policy, government budgets, workplaces, child development and education.

## Pitfalls to avoid

### Unfortunate word choices

Words have power to inform or mislead your audience. Please exercise very intentional word choices for fairness and accuracy. For instance terms such as **“dispute,” “quarrel,” or “love triangle,”** detract from the violence and criminal nature of the behavior.<sup>1</sup> Name it for what it is: domestic violence.

Similarly, avoid phrasing that suggests the alleged perpetrator **“snapped”** as it leaves the impression that all was well up until the homicide, and that is almost never true in domestic violence. Instead of painting it as an unpredictable event, reporters can gather information that shows a pattern of control, intimidation and other escalating violence leading up to the homicide. Ask questions as to whether the perpetrator was acting jealous, possessive, or overly protective of the victim(s). Did the victim seem isolated from family, friends or neighbors?

In respect to the effects on children, improve characterizations such as **“the children were unharmed”** with **“although understandably traumatized, the children were physically unharmed during this particular incident.”**

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<sup>1</sup> “A Handbook for Journalists,” Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, June 2000.

### Victim blaming

Use extreme caution to avoid any suggestion of victim blaming. Instead of questioning “**why did she stay/go with him/return home/let him take her kids?**” reporters can explore what were the possible barriers to her leaving or staying safe after she left. Do question how individuals and communities can support women seeking safety. Do investigate how other batterers have stopped the violence or where/how community systems have responded or intervened to hold batterers accountable for violence while protecting victim family members.

### Re-victimization

A foremost concern of the Ohio Domestic Violence Network is the safety and security of all involved parties, but especially those directly affected by the crimes of domestic violence and domestic violence-related homicide. Safety and security can be compromised by media practices that re-victimize subjects of news stories, expose them to an ongoing threat, or violate a crime victim’s rights. Keep in mind there are frequently many secondary victims in domestic violence and domestic violence-related homicides, and that **safety and security extends to the emotional safety and trauma recovery of survivor or victim families**, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

Related to re-victimization is **respect for crime victims’ rights**. Keep in mind a victim’s right to privacy and to determine the parameters for being interviewed. It is okay for victims and secondary victims to decline interviews, identify spokespersons, release statements in lieu of interviews, avoid press conference appearances, be interviewed only by specific reporters, and refrain from answering uncomfortable, traumatizing or inappropriate questions. They may select personal items and photos to be aired and should be respected when they exclude others. Interviews may have legal ramifications in criminal trials and custody cases, and survivors/witnesses are regularly advised and bound by court orders against making comments during court proceedings.

### Compromising Codes of Ethics

The Society of Professional Journalists adopted its code of ethics in 1996. Of particular relevance in domestic violence reporting are ethical practices related to seeking the truth and reporting it accurately, **minimizing harm** and being accountable. The full list is available at <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>. This list is a sample:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.

## **Broadening the Storyline**

### **Immediacy**

Look for the risk factors leading up to a homicide. Go beyond questions about whether a victim had a protection order or vacated the home. Consider the behavior of the alleged perpetrator. Were guns in the home? Was there previous police intervention or incarceration? Was there a history of strangulation, stalking or sexual abuse? How many texts, calls, web posts or emails was the victim enduring from the abuser? Were there threats to victim, self, children or pets? Was the victim taking steps to separate or distance themselves from the relationship? Explore possible barriers to leaving.

### **Local impact and responses**

Provide comparisons of local data to regional, state and national trend (see resources below). Identify local domestic violence programs, batterers intervention programs and local task forces or systems working together to address domestic violence. Note major gaps in services or challenges in utilization such as cost, funding, accessibility, distance, or culturally relevant services (for example services for non-English speaking or deaf clients).

Identify services available to victims that go beyond emergency shelter. Local programs often provide legal advocacy such as assistance in obtaining protection orders and referrals to attorneys. Programs normally provide victim-centered safety planning. They may also offer individual counseling, group counseling and children's programming.

### **Consequences**

Examine the loss of the victims in terms of their contributions to the community and their family. Report on the services being provided to surviving family members and custody concerns for children. Broadly consider the impact of the tragedy including the impact on the victim's workplace, school, and faith organization and their responses.

### **Policy**

Consult the Ohio Domestic Violence Network to identify proposed or recently enacted legislation or associated institutional changes or even inaction relevant to the case circumstances. Examine the involvement of survivors in public policy or systems change. Inquire how domestic violence could be rightly elevated to the urgent public priority it should command.

### **Social Implications**

Look to programs, initiatives and community-based responses that are working to prevent domestic violence and promote healthy relationships. Investigate societal conditions and public perceptions that contribute to violence against women and domestic violence. Consider the intersections of other forms of violence such as child abuse, human trafficking or drug crimes.

## Resources for the Media

### Ohio

- Ohio Domestic Violence Network (ODVN), the statewide domestic violence coalition – list of **local programs** in Ohio, statistics (including arrests as reported by local law enforcement agencies, and *DV Counts*, an annual census survey of Ohio shelters/programs on service utilization and unmet needs), public policy updates, analysis and comment; 614-781-9651, [www.odvn.org](http://www.odvn.org) \*
- Ohio Family Violence Prevention Project from Health Policy Institute of Ohio – **state and county-specific incidence data**, comparisons to other public health concerns, and cost estimations. <http://www.healthpolicyohio.org/special-projects/ohio-family-violence-prevention-project/index.php>

### National

- Futures Without Violence – national and international leadership on awareness, training and programming for the prevention and ending of violence against women and children; 415-678-5500, [www.futureswithoutviolence.org](http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org)
- National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) – national experts on policy and practice, topic-specific fact sheets, *DV Counts* nationwide annual census survey of shelters/programs on service utilization and unmet needs; 202-543-5566, [www.nnedv.org](http://www.nnedv.org)
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) – serves as a national information and referral center for the general public, media, battered women and their children, allied and member agencies and organizations. 303-839-1852, [www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline – 24-hour hotline available to victims and anyone calling on their behalf to provide crisis intervention, safety planning, information and referral to programs in all 50 states; 1-800-799-SAFE, [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

\*Note that ODVN can also provide materials on topic specific issues such as Technology and Domestic Violence and some materials in other languages. Many resources are available for download from [www.odvn.org](http://www.odvn.org)