



CITY OF HOUSTON

Houston Police Department

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September 23, 2022

Troy Finner
Chief of Police



The Honorable Victoria Neave, Chair, The Honorable Valorie Swanson, Vice-Chair, and Honorable Committee Members of the House Juvenile Justice & Family Issues Committee,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide this written testimony to this esteemed legislative body. The Houston Police Department (HPD) appreciates the opportunity to provide our law enforcement perspective regarding domestic violence, obstacles to reporting, and potential technological solutions.

In October 2019, the Houston Police Department launched the Domestic Abuse Response Team, better known as DART. Its mission is to reduce domestic violence homicides through law enforcement intervention, immediate resource referrals through community-based partnerships, and evidence-based prosecution. DART is a mobile crisis response composed of specially trained officers, victim advocates, and forensic nurses who offer trauma-informed care to victims of domestic violence within minutes of the victim calling 911. DART has proven to be an invaluable resource for victims of violent crime and for prosecutions, as victim advocates can provide immediate on-scene needs and safety assessments and a domestic violence forensic nurse can provide an exam for those in need of medical assistance. These resources may not be available or accessible but for the on-scene DART response. The forensic DV exam provides judges and prosecutors with touch DNA evidence that can carry the burden of proof instead of having to rely on “he said, she said” statements.

The program changes the landscape for law enforcement as well. Officers now have access to and funding to provide safe housing for a victim when emergency shelter space is not available. This is a true success because prior to this program, officers would be forced to tell a victim “I’m sorry, we have no place for you to go” even when knowing the victim may still be in danger. This is true collaborative success!

Despite our successes, there are still many challenges to domestic violence. Because the committee is charged with addressing, I wanted to highlight some of the most common obstacles for reporting of which DART is aware of:

- Fear of being deported
- Fear that children will be removed by CPS (abuser often tell them that this will happen)



- Victims believe that there has to be physical abuse in order to call the police
- If abuser is arrested, concern that there will not be financial stability (i.e., lack of economic independence)
- Fear of retaliation by abuser (especially if there is no arrest or consequence) - fear that violence can escalate
- Abuser physically preventing them from calling the police (perhaps this is an opportunity for technology)
- Fear of not been believed by police and police minimizing the violence

However, over the past several years we have seen law enforcement and the court systems adapt to meet some of these challenges. Due to the COVID pandemic many things operated virtually, including our court systems. As a result, we have seen an increase in court attendance by survivors who would otherwise not be able or are afraid to participate in court proceedings. Having access to court systems is crucial in the lives of survivors. Many do not have access to a vehicle for transportation and others cannot take off from their jobs to obtain a vehicle, drive downtown, find a babysitter, pay for parking, miss from work, and afford legal representation.

For all of the reasons listed above, survivors should have access to virtual courts. Lack of accessibility to our court systems should be the last thing on a survivor's mind when this could be the ONLY recourse available to keep him/her safe. Without protective orders, officers have no way to arrest a suspect for violating such orders.

The uptick in participation in virtual criminal justice courts is crucial and proves that survivors would participate if access to courts was more accessible. Virtual courts also provide survivors with the support he/she needs to return to their "new" normal.

As noted above, technological solutions include continued and more frequent use of virtual courtrooms for both civil cases, such as custody agreements, as well as criminal cases, such as protective orders. (Protective orders give officers the teeth we need to be protected from their ex-partners and spouses.) Allowing for virtual courtrooms would allow for more participation and may likely ensure that survivors are getting the resources and legal representation necessary.

Thank you for your time and interest in helping HPD and other law enforcement agencies combat this rapidly increasing issue.

Sincerely,

S/ Julie Pleasant

Julie Pleasant, Lieutenant
Houston Police Department
Victims Service Division