

The Examiner (Eastern Jackson County, MO)

Saturday, January 15, 2005

Combating Domestic Violence; Local Officer Takes Proactive Approach

By David Tanner

Patience pays dividends in the community Jeff Lawhon serves.

Detective Jeff Lawhon of the Independence Domestic Violence unit makes a call on his cell phone to check on a man he has to serve with an order of protection.

The Independence police detective spends a lot of time in his vehicle and waiting for his opportunities.

“I’ve spent an entire 10-hour shift tracking one person down,” he said.

Lawhon finds subjects and serves court papers in domestic violence cases. While the work is routine most of the time, it is also unconventional because Lawhon requires freedom of time and mobility.

“I’ve been up at 4 in the morning waiting on people to leave the house,” he said. “Early morning, late night, all night. Whatever it takes.”

Lawhon is articulate, compassionate, and above all, he is very positive about his job.

“I thought that domestic violence was a problem and I just thought, what can I do to help,” he said. “It’s both rewarding and frustrating.”

Lawhon’s salary is funded by an Independence Police Department grant obtained through the U.S. Department of Justice’s Violence Against Women Act.

The grant puts a network of people in a position to help victims, and provide opportunity for the offenders to shape up or face consequences.

After serving a man with an order of protection at the Department of Corrections, Detective Jeff Lawhon of the Independence Domestic Violence unit asks District Administrator Bill Neely look up another man he has to serve.

“We take a proactive approach to domestic violence,” Lawhon said. “It’s kind of a mission sometimes.”

Whether an allegation of violence is true or false makes no difference to Lawhon, who has served 560 protection orders, also known as ex parte orders, since 1998.

“It’s not my place to judge whether the allegations are true,” he said. “I let the judge decide. I don’t know the petitioner or the respondent.”

He does know how to track people.

Lawhon searches law databases for his work, including at the Corrections Department of Missouri’s probation and parole office on 42nd Terrace in Independence.

Lawhon visited the facility on Wednesday after learning a man he needed to serve would be checking in with a parole officer at 4 p.m.

Parole supervisor Bill Neely, a friend of Lawhon’s since Boy Scouts, invited the detective to wait for the man in a meeting room at the end of a carpeted hallway.

Moments later, an officer led the man, named Rick for the purpose of this story, down the same hallway and introduced him to Detective Lawhon.

In a calm and rehearsed manner, Lawhon made sure Rick knew why he was being served.

“This is a 15-day order of protection,” he said. “This basically says you are not allowed to go near the petitioner. If you are out and you see her somewhere, you had better go somewhere else.”

In the order, the petitioner and Rick’s ex-partner, called Jen for the purpose of this story, accused Rick of harassing her in person and over the telephone. She said Rick threatened violence, especially when he was drinking. She was afraid for herself and the child they had together.

Rick did not deny the allegation directly to Lawhon as some alleged offenders do, but he was defensive.

“She calls me, too,” Rick told the detective.

Lawhon informed Rick about Jen’s custody of the child, and about a court date later this month.

Neely told Rick a violation of his order of protection would translate to a violation of Rick’s parole.

“You’re double dipped on this,” Neely warned him, and with that, Rick was free to go about his business.

Jen, who recently moved out from Rick's house, had followed a process, encouraged by advocates at the Hope House shelter in Independence, to file the protection order with Jackson County.

Rick, although a familiar face in the parole office for several driving-while-intoxicated convictions, was not a frequent offender for domestic violence.

Someone with four convictions for domestic violence in Jackson County automatically goes to state court on the fifth offense.

In Independence, a prosecutor hired through the same grant Lawhon is paid from, sees all local domestic violence cases.

The Violence Against Women Act grant, in addition to Lawhon's salary and a prosecutor, pays for an additional detective and a full-time victim advocate at Hope House.

Ilene Sheehan, vice president of programs at Hope House, explained the importance of the network.

"The positions have given stability in these women's lives," Sheehan said. "When she calls, she wants someone to respond."

The Independence City Council wrote the network and the domestic violence docket of Municipal Court into a city ordinance.

"Before the ordinance, if the state didn't take (a case), it was gone," Sheehan said.

Prosecutor Ellen Greenberg and Detective Joe Christianson join Lawhon in the Violence Against Women grant network, while detectives Mark Evans and Keith Malone work under a slightly different grant called STOP Violence.

Blue Springs, Lee's Summit and Raytown have followed suit with similar grants and ordinances in the last few years.

"It's important to have a domestic violence court, and have people trained in the domestic violence field," Greenberg said. "I just know without services, there would be no help for (victims). They have to have a court to come to. There needs to be some sort of penalty."

The Independence domestic violence court hears cases on Friday mornings and on two Wednesday evenings per month.

"There are a lot of victims being abused, and a lot of the victims don't know what to do or what resources are available for them," Lawhon said.

The detective has seen enough to prove abuse is cyclical.

“In every single domestic violence case, the cycle of violence is there,” Lawhon said. “Just look at a person’s history.”

Lawhon often takes an officer with him while serving documents to respondents.

“It’s not peaceful, but when there are two police officers they might run their mouth, but they’re not going to do anything.”

By following through with Jen’s request for protection against Rick, Lawhon hoped to prevent Rick’s situation from escalating, either through violence or intimidation.

“It’s a cycle that intensifies as it goes around,” Lawhon said. “A lot of people think they are in trouble when they get this order. It’s more like, stay away, don’t go to the house, don’t harass the petitioner.”

Lawhon said a few respondents have eluded him over the years, but he usually catches up with them.

“The attitude is basically the same,” he said. “They say they have nothing to do with it. They always deny the allegations.”

Lawhon will be on the job for another couple of years. He has been with Independence Police Department since 1974 and is nearing retirement.

He has been married for 31 years, which he considers a testament to his commitments and a mutual patience with his wife about his job.

“There are times you want to have dinner at 7 or 8 and you don’t get home until 11 or 12,” he said. “Most of the time I can adjust my hours.”

To reach David Tanner e-mail david.tanner@examiner.net or call (816) 350-6324.

The Examiner - serving Eastern Jackson County, Missouri since 1898.

Copyright © 2005 The Examiner.