

Stalking: A Multidisciplinary Approach - DVERT, Colorado Springs

WHAT IS DVERT?

Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team (DVERT) is a multidisciplinary program based in Colorado Springs, Colorado that addresses serious domestic violence cases. These cases are referred to DVERT from any one of partnering agencies. Following a referral, the DVERT team meets to determine whether a case warrants the full use of the team's resources. If the team decides to take the case, DVERT takes over all aspects of the case, including investigation and advocacy services. The team covers two jurisdictions, with a population of approximately 600,000. It has been in existence since 1996, and sprang out of the Minneapolis project, a National Institute of Justice funded study researching the impact of law enforcement agencies making arrests in domestic violence cases. Colorado Springs was one of six sites chosen to replicate the project. Over time, it became apparent that looking at law enforcement response was not sufficient and that other parts of the criminal justice and victim assistance systems needed to be brought to the table. Now, some 10 years after the original project, DVERT in Colorado Springs boasts 36 agencies. Agencies range from law enforcement and prosecutors' offices to social service agencies and animal abuse programs. DVERT has an annual budget of \$1.8 million, half of which comes from grants and the rest from contributions made by the partnering agencies. We recently spoke to Mr. Howard Black, the Executive Director of DVERT, who shed some light on the workings, advantages, and difficulties of running a multidisciplinary response program on domestic violence, which includes intimate partner stalking.

How did you get all of your partnering agencies to come to the table and how do you keep them there?

Colorado Springs is a collaborative community. We've been working with one another for many years. Do we have issues? Absolutely. I think what was helpful for us was starting small, beginning with three agencies, then developing into having 36 partnering agencies. When we first started DVERT, we started with the District Attorney's office, the Colorado Springs Police Department, and T.E.S.S.A. (Trust Education Safety Support Action), our partnering advocacy program. From there, and over the last six years, we've just continued to bring people on. I hope it continues to be that kind of an evolution of the program.

Are there any disciplines not included in DVERT that you would like to see there?

Yes. There are lots of disciplines that are still not included. There are clinical folks that I'd like to see us deal with, and we still need to take a look at more alcohol and drug related issues and treatment programs. Also, there are still some school districts we'd like to include.

Are judges or the court system involved in DVERT in any way?

Yes they are. We work with the court, especially when we are dealing with custody issues and issues surrounding the safety of children. In those cases, we are more proactive in dealing with the courts, making sure that they have good information in order to make good decisions.

How do cases come to your attention?

They come to us through the referral process. We are totally driven by it and approximately 95 percent of cases come in from referrals. The referral forms come in from multiple sources. They can come from law enforcement, prosecution, advocacy, and other agencies and individuals who come into contact with domestic violence victims and offenders. We get copies of every arrest document that is generated, and we have our crime analyst who actually reviews those cases for lethality as they come in. The cases referred to us are, for the most part, based on lethality. The people referring cases do it because they think that the victim is in danger. We have also had some victims who have self-referred through our crisis line.

How many cases does DVERT handle in an average year?

That's a complicated question because we have five different programmatic areas within DVERT. When we're looking at the most intensive case load, we do about 500 cases a year. We expect to handle at least 200 stalking cases in 2003. In our community, there are between 15,000 and 20,000 domestic violence calls each year and approximately 3,500 arrests each year. One has to be careful when one does the math on domestic violence cases. Sometimes the offender has multiple cases. For example, 500 cases could mean 700 arrests. We are working on a case right now where we have 47 violations of a restraining order, so those are actually 47 separate arrests. Now, of course, we'll collapse those into one felony charge.

How many of your domestic violence cases have a stalking component?

If you look at the Colorado stalking statute, you see that it's an easy statute to work from. I'd say that at least 50 percent of our cases have the potential of having a stalking component attached to it.

Are stalking cases more difficult to handle than domestic violence cases that don't involve stalking?

Yes and no. Sometimes the stalking cases can be very difficult. In some cases, we may have a suspect who is of high lethality. In these cases, we may choose an intervention that includes surveillance. Many stalking cases are, quite frankly, easily put together. People make stalking more difficult to investigate and prosecute than it should be. Many of these stalking cases are right here in front of us; they're already done. For instance, if there are multiple violations of a restraining order, it is easy to pull all violations together and develop a stalking case, at least in Colorado.

What is the biggest obstacle to dealing with stalking cases?

Resources. It is quite difficult for uniformed officers to recognize the pattern of behavior in a stalking case. The problem is the lack of time. They are dealing with what is in front of them when they respond to a call, and if it is a violation of a protective order they deal with that and then have to move on to the other 25 calls.

Does DVERT respond to post-incarceration threats to stalking victims?

Volume 3, Number 1, Winter 2003

Absolutely. Probation is one of our partners, and we work extensively with them. On a weekly basis a probation officer and a detective go out visiting clients, and any of the more serious stalking cases we have are placed with our probation officer. We also file charges when a suspect violates a restraining order by contacting the victim while that suspect is incarcerated.

Do you ever close out a case or do cases simply go to a sleep mode?

Cases are very fluid. Once a case becomes a DVERT case, the activity of the case depends on the threat level. We try to get containment around the perpetrator, and programs and safety planning around the victim and the children. Our advocates stay in contact with victims and if the advocate reports back that the victim is feeling some level of safety, that the offender hasn't been in contact with her for a reasonable amount of time, and that the children aren't at risk, then we close that case. We make those decisions from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Has DVERT been evaluated in any way? Do you have any information about victim satisfaction with your work?

There have been 11 independent research projects completed on DVERT. One of the projects looked at a sample of victims and found a high level of victim satisfaction in dealing with the police and the advocates at DVERT. Then, we also had a sample looking at recidivism rates in our most intensive case load.

Do you offer help for communities that want to start similar coordinated responses?

Absolutely! In fact, we invite site visits into Colorado Springs. Last year we averaged about 2.5 visits a month. We have had communities come from all over the United States and the world, including China and Thailand.

Has DVERT been replicated in other communities?

Yes. There are about 30-35 "DVERTs" in the country. They all look different.

What advice would you offer those communities that would like to establish a similar multidisciplinary program?

Start small, and then grow. Multidisciplinary work groups are difficult because one is dealing with work cultures that are quite different from one another. But it is also very rewarding because we are truly making a difference: a difference in the system, and above all, in individual lives. It is great to see victims making choices that are healthy choices for them, not necessarily for us. I can't imagine working domestic violence cases today and not having a multidisciplinary response. When you bring systems together you are looking at domestic violence cases from all different perspectives. Everyone has a valuable perspective on how to move forward with a case. Multiplicity of perspectives does nothing but enhance the response and empower victims.