Fairfax County’s Lethality Assessment Program

On July 1, 2015, Fairfax County implemented the Maryland Model Lethality Assessment Program (LAP). The LAP is a nationally-recognized, evidence-based program with demonstrated success in both strengthening partnerships between law enforcement and domestic violence service providers and connecting victims of domestic violence with lifesaving services. Ultimately, the LAP works to reduce domestic violence fatalities. How it works:

- Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) officers arrive on the scene of a domestic violence situation, determine which party is the predominate aggressor, and assess whether they have probable cause to make an arrest.
- Following an arrest, one officer takes the offender to the magistrate to obtain an arrest warrant and emergency protective order.
- The second officer will locate a quiet space to ask the victim the 11 questions on the lethality assessment tool.
- If the victim screens as high-danger (answers enough of the questions positively), the officer calls the 24-hour LAP Line, staffed by the Fairfax County Office for Women & Domestic and Sexual Violence Services (OFWDSVS).
- The officer offers the victim the choice to speak to the advocate on the LAP Line.
- If they choose, the victim and the LAP Line Advocate engage in a brief confidential conversation about how to stay safe for the next 24 hours and plan for a follow-up call or appointment the next day to have a more detailed conversation about the victim’s options and available resources.
- With the victim’s permission, information is passed along to service providers in order to facilitate that next day connection: FCPD’s Victim Services Section triages these high-danger cases and immediately engages in proactive services to support the victim throughout the criminal justice process. When the victim is not engaging in the criminal justice process (e.g. an arrest warrant was not issued), the county’s Domestic Violence Action Center (DVAC) advocates will connect with the victim.

The LAP illustrates what domestic violence really looks like in our community.

Highlights from the First Year

- About one-half of screens were determined to be high-danger and triggered a call to the LAP Line.
- OFWDSVS answered 555 calls to the LAP Line (about 46 calls/month).
- 80% of the high-danger victims chose to speak to the LAP Line Advocate, a key element to the program that demonstrates to the victim that advocates are concerned for their safety and that options are available for help.
- 3 out of every 4 [76%] LAP cases involved an offender who was violently or constantly jealous, or controlled most of the victim’s daily activities
- 6 in 10 of the cases [58%] involved prior attempts at separation
- Over half [51%] of the high-danger victims believed their offender might try to kill them
- One-half [49%] of the cases involved a history of stalking (follow, spy, or leave threatening messages)
- One-third [31%] of the cases involved an offender who was unemployed
- Children are impacted by domestic violence: 64% of LAP cases involved children in the home. A total of 583 kids witnessed high-danger situations in the home
Understanding the reality of domestic violence and stalking in our community informs policymakers and service providers in responding effectively to the issues. Knowing the “red flags” helps victims and bystanders recognize the signs of dangerous relationships.

**The LAP works to reduce lethal and near-lethal domestic violence.**

- **71% of the LAP cases involved a history of strangulation.** Strangulation can be the last violent act before homicide. A woman who is strangled is seven times more likely to be a victim of homicide compared to women who have never been strangled. Early identification and intervention is crucial to homicide prevention!

- **Information from the lethality assessment is used by Commonwealth’s Attorneys to better advocate for safer bond and sentencing orders.** Controlling our more dangerous offenders keeps their victims, and our community-at-large, safer!

- **Following engagement with a LAP Line Advocate, victims are increasingly following up with research-validated protective services, such as advocacy and shelter.**
  - FCPD VSS reports that LAP victims, who have an increased awareness of their own level of danger, can be more likely to participate in the criminal justice process.
  - DVAC has seen a 30% increase in the amount of victims served (FY15: 873 and FY16:1138) and a 40% increase in the number of children impacted by violence (FY15: 1053 and FY16: 1479) over the past year.
  - 26 high-danger victims, and their children, entered into emergency shelter following the LAP screening. Artemis House (Shelter House, Inc.) and Bethany House of Northern Virginia prioritize LAP cases when assessing victims for shelter entry.

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