

# Planning and Conducting Best-Practice Assessments of Community Response to Domestic Violence

## Criminal Justice System Response: Emergency Communications (911 and Dispatch)

Written by Jane M. Sadusky

With contributions from Denise Eng,  
Casey McGee and Ellen Pence, Praxis  
International and Rhonda Martinson,  
Battered Women's Justice Project

© 2010 Praxis International

Condensed and revised by  
Casey McGee in 2011



Praxis International

*Technical Assistance on Safety and Accountability Audits*

206 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 207  
Duluth, MN 55806  
218-585-0487

179 Robie St. E., Suite 260  
St. Paul, MN 55107  
651-699-8000

[www.praxisinternational.org](http://www.praxisinternational.org)

*This checklist was developed by Praxis International in partnership with the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice and was supported by Grant No. 2004-WT-AX-K052 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

## Domestic Violence Intervention Best Practice Checklists

### 911 Call Taking and Dispatch

Best practices in the intervention response to domestic violence maximize safety for victims, hold offenders accountable while offering opportunities to change, and set an expectation of agency and practitioner accountability to one another and to victims and offenders. Characteristics of such best practices include:

1. Adherence to an interagency approach and collective intervention goals
2. Attention to the context and severity of abuse into each intervention
3. Recognition that most domestic violence is a patterned crime requiring continuing engagement with victims and offenders
4. Sure and swift consequences for continued abuse
5. Use of the power of the criminal justice system to send messages of help and accountability
6. Actions that reduce unintended consequences and the disparity of impact on victims and offenders

The attached best-practice assessment checklists have been designed to assist emergency communications (911), police patrol services, and CCRs in answering questions like *Are we centralizing and strengthening safety for victims of domestic violence in our community? How are we doing? Are we making things better or worse? Do our efforts enhance or diminish offender accountability?*

The checklists lend themselves to a relatively quick review of case files or reports by an interagency team to help your community's intervention agencies determine their adherence to best practices. We recommend that you follow these simple steps in conducting the case review.

1. Determine which intervention agency or agencies will be reviewed. Do so with their full knowledge and consent of the nature and scope of your review. Transparency is key.
2. Assemble a small group of practitioners who will review the files and report their collective findings and feedback to agency heads. This process benefits from the dialogue, reflection, and discussion that is possible with a small set of experienced practitioners, rather than relying on the limited perspective of a single person.
  - ✓ The work group consists ideally of three to eight members.
  - ✓ The team should have relevant interagency representation. For example, an assessment focused on police patrol would include representation from 911, patrol and prosecution.
  - ✓ The team should also contain at least one member who is a community-based advocate for victims of domestic violence.
  - ✓ Develop a confidentiality agreement governing how case file information will be treated and when and to whom it will be released. (It is equally important to protect the confidentiality of parties involved in a domestic violence incident as it is to protect the reputation of the officer who responded to the call and the respect of the agency head who generously offered reports for review.)
3. Identify and appoint a team leader who will:
  - ✓ Identify, gather and photocopy "case files" (e.g. investigation or patrol reports).
  - ✓ Schedule and facilitate work group meetings.
  - ✓ Keep a written record of the work group's discussions and findings.

4. Gather and photocopy case files and schedule all of the meetings.
  - ✓ We recommend meeting four to ten times total, completing all the work within a period of three months.
  - ✓ Use these guidelines for the numbers of files to sample, based on the scope of your review:
    - 911 call receiving and dispatching: 15 to 50 audio recordings of domestic violence–related calls (and, if possible, a printed transcript of the call) AND recordings and printouts of the corresponding contact between dispatchers and patrol officers for each call (typically referred to as “CAD” or computer-aided dispatch), if available
    - Police patrol response: 15 to 50 patrol incident or arrest reports for domestic violence–related cases, divided between arrest and non-arrest cases
    - Police follow-up investigations: 15 to 50 follow-up investigation reports for domestic violence–related cases
    - Prosecution charging: 15 to 50 sets of prosecution case files, divided equally between cases charged, declined, and any deferred prosecution or other diversion
5. Review the files:
  - ✓ Team members use the worksheet as a guide to identify practices that are included or missing in the response.
  - ✓ Work through each case file paying close attention to whether and how it reflects the practices listed on the worksheet (use one worksheet per case).
  - ✓ Check off all practices that are evident in the call, report, or file.
  - ✓ Note what is missing.
  - ✓ Use the notes column to record additional observations, questions, or examples related to the case and the practitioner’s response.
  - ✓ Complete the case review summary at the end of the worksheet.
6. Work as a team to articulate feedback and recommendations for agency heads:
  - ✓ **NOTE: Because a practice is not evident in the case record does not necessarily mean that it does not happen.** It may happen but not be documented.
  - ✓ Affirm that team members are in agreement on the conclusions.
  - ✓ Identify any areas of practice where the team is not in agreement or where additional investigation is necessary in order to reach any conclusions.
  - ✓ Provide specific feedback to the appropriate agency on its response to domestic violence cases, including examples of best practices that are in place, as well as recommended changes.

Call #/ID \_\_\_\_\_

**PART 1: RECEIVING CALLS***Review transcript and/or recording*

Best Practices RECEIVING 911 Domestic Violence Calls	Notes NA = Not applicable
Instructions: Check all practices demonstrated by the calltaker; give examples when possible.	
<b>1. Communicate effectively and respectfully with callers.</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Respond to callers who are unable to communicate, difficult to understand, or difficult to work with. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Respond with courtesy, respect, and reassurance</li> <li>○ Adjust response to caller's fear, injury, disability, intoxication</li> <li>○ Use a TTY/TDD when appropriate</li> <li>○ Slow down, simplify language</li> <li>○ Reinforce that 911 help is available, regardless of how many times they have called</li> <li>○ Reflect awareness of impact of strangulation on speech</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Elicit information safely. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Verify that it is safe for caller to stay on the line</li> <li>○ Verify that it is safe for caller to speak freely <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If not, ask yes/no questions</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Respond to calls that are disconnected or incomplete. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Be alert to suspect on the line</li> <li>○ Be alert to background sounds</li> <li>○ Check whether phone number or address is known location for prior domestic calls</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reflect awareness of cultural and social impact on communication. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Utilize or offer language interpretation</li> <li>○ Avoid jargon and speak slowly</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>2. Determine the nature of the emergency and the response priority.</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Establish immediate threat to persons at the scene and responding officers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Determine the nature of injuries and need for medical attention.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Establish whether children are safe or unsafe, at risk of being harmed or abducted.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Dispatch as a high priority call unless safety information warrants lower priority.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Use code that identifies call as domestic violence-related.</li> </ul>	
<b>3. Direct officers to the scene.</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Establish names of involved parties and their locations.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Communicate the caller's location accurately to officers.</li> </ul>	
<b>4. Establish the type and level of danger.</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Elicit information from the caller about immediate danger and harm that has occurred or are occurring.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask caller about the suspect's history of aggression—toward the caller, responding officers, and others.</li> </ul>	

Best Practices RECEIVING 911 Domestic Violence Calls	Notes NA = Not applicable
Instructions: Check all practices demonstrated by the calltaker; give examples when possible.	
<b>5. Advance safety for those at the scene while help is en route.</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Provide safety suggestions or instructions to the caller. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide medical instructions to the caller. <input type="checkbox"/> When possible, engage with suspect on the line to control escalation while officers are en route. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Remain calm and respectful.</li> <li>○ Avoid arguing.</li> <li>○ Do not share what the caller said or why police were called.</li> </ul>	
<b>6. Communicate and document information related to the nature of the emergency; violence, threats, and injuries; and the safety of responding officers and those at the scene.</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Access records and relay information regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Orders for protection, no-contact and harassment orders</li> <li>○ Active probation or parole status</li> </ul> <input type="checkbox"/> Document disposition of the call.	
<b>7. Establish a foundation for engaging people seeking help in domestic abuse cases.</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Avoid placing the victim in a position of confrontation with the offender. <input type="checkbox"/> Protect the victim from retaliation when communicating with the offender. <input type="checkbox"/> Treat each interaction with the victim as an opportunity to build a partnership over multiple contacts. <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrate awareness of signs that violence may be resuming or escalating. <input type="checkbox"/> Inform caller before placing him/her on hold.	
<b>Receiving 911 calls – List gaps in best practices:</b>	

## PART 2: DISPATCHING CALLS

*Review CAD printout and/or recording*

Best Practices in DISPATCHING 911 Domestic Violence Calls	Notes
Instructions: Check all practices demonstrated by the dispatcher; give examples when possible.	
<b><i>1. Relay the nature of the emergency and the response priority.</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Describe threat of harm to responding officers and others <input type="checkbox"/> Describe nature of injuries and need for medical attention <input type="checkbox"/> Whether children are present and safe or unsafe, at risk of being harmed or abducted. <input type="checkbox"/> Priority dispatch unless safety information warrants lower priority. <input type="checkbox"/> Use code that identifies call as domestic violence-related.	
<b><i>2. Direct officers to the correct address, location, and appropriate people at the scene, including detailed information that will help to locate a suspect who has left the scene.</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Include correct address and physical location <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and describe involved parties <input type="checkbox"/> Describe suspect if he/she is gone-on-arrival: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Physical description, including clothing</li> <li>○ Means and direction of travel, including vehicle</li> <li>○ Locations the suspect is known to frequent</li> </ul>	
<b><i>3. Relay information about the type and level of danger including violence, threats and injuries.</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Describe immediate danger and acts of violence or threats to those at the scene <input type="checkbox"/> Suspect's history of aggression <input type="checkbox"/> Records check, including court orders and probation/parole <input type="checkbox"/> Complete CAD entries and radio transmissions accurately	
<b><i>4. Advance officer and public safety.</i></b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Check officer status and safety. <input type="checkbox"/> Update changes on scene. <input type="checkbox"/> Update locations of suspect and caller. <input type="checkbox"/> Check for previous calls involving same location or parties.	
<b>Dispatching 911 calls – List gaps in best practices:</b>	