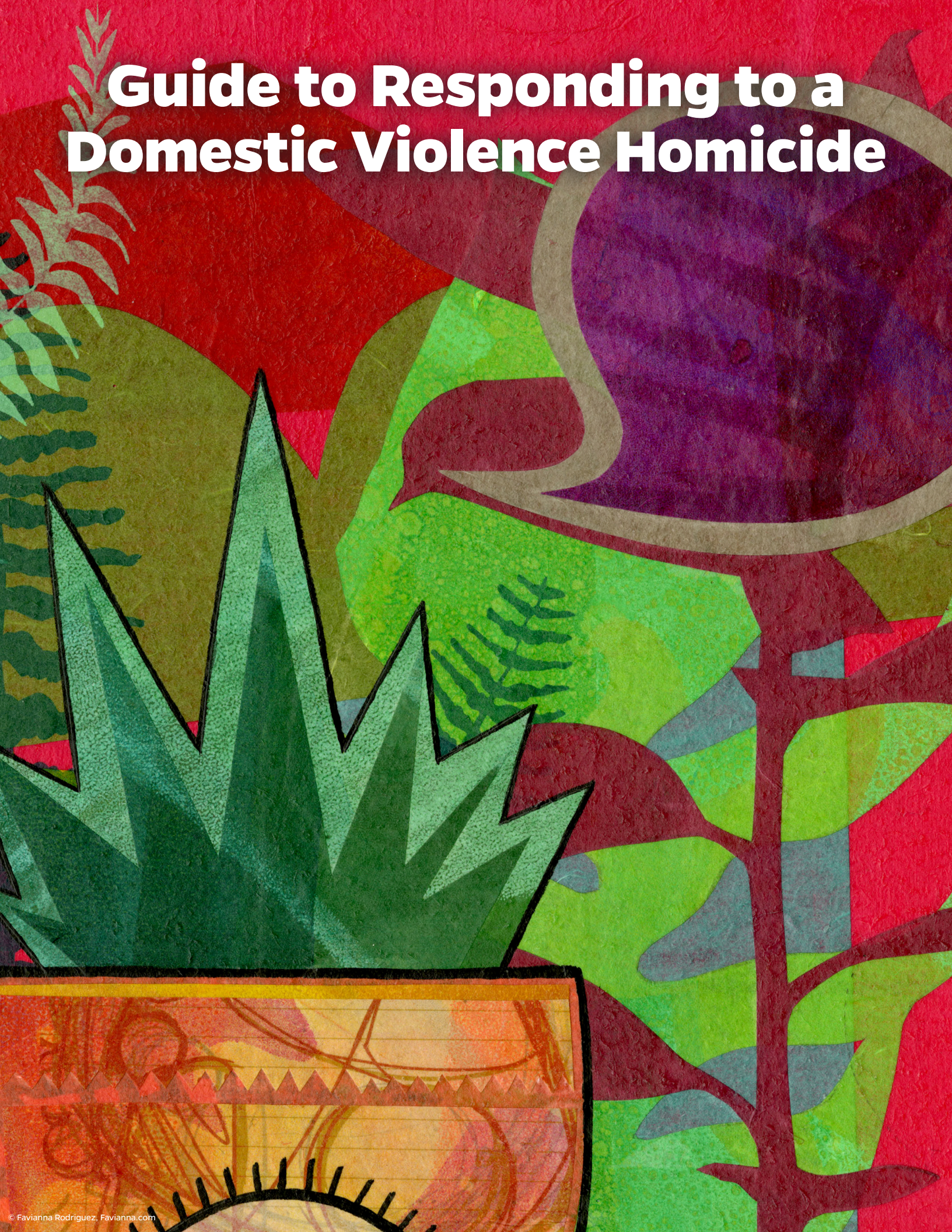


# Guide to Responding to a Domestic Violence Homicide



# Guide to Responding to a Domestic Violence Homicide<sup>1</sup>

Anyone experiencing domestic violence can be at risk of homicide. Advocates know this as they work with survivors, advocating on their behalf and building relationships with them and often their families. When a domestic violence homicide occurs the traumatic impact is profound for those closest to the victim, including their children, family and friends as well as community or tribal domestic violence programs and the community.

While we can do all we can to prevent domestic violence homicides, domestic violence homicides can still occur. Whether the homicide victim received services or never sought services, domestic violence program staff will be significantly impacted. This guide seeks to prepare programs in supporting their staff, volunteers, survivors, and community in the aftermath of a domestic violence homicide.

When a homicide results from domestic violence, the victim's community, family, and friends often look to the local community or tribal domestic and sexual violence service program (program) to respond in a myriad of ways. Questions about confidentiality arise, and programs face a desire to spread awareness about domestic violence and comply with restrictions around survivor privacy and confidentiality. While the community often looks to the program for guidance, program staff are also navigating grief and secondary trauma of their own. To alleviate being caught off guard and overwhelmed in the moment, this guide seeks to offer some support to programs when responding to a domestic violence homicide in their community.

## Idaho Fatalities Related to Domestic Violence

In Idaho, 1 in 4 homicides are by an intimate partner.<sup>2</sup> In 2017 and 2018, intimate partner fatalities in Idaho related to domestic violence were between 17 and 18. However, in 2019 and 2020, the number of fatalities related to intimate partner homicides fell to 8 per year. Idaho ranks fifth in the country for highest rates of suicide.<sup>3</sup> Combining the already high rates of suicide with domestic violence, it is no surprise that murder-suicides occur at such high rates in Idaho. For more information on domestic violence related fatalities in Idaho, you can contact the Idaho Coalition staff or visit the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence state-by-state statistics page at <https://www.ncadv.org/statistics>.

## Impact on Program Staff

Whether or not you provide services to a victim of a domestic violence related homicide, leadership can expect homicide to affect staff. It is important for programs to provide support to staff as they process the homicide on an immediate, short term and long-term bases.

A great deal of attention and intention should be provided to staff who worked directly with the victim as they often experience guilt, shame, or anger in the wake of a domestic violence related homicide. Remember that there is a wide range of individual responses to trauma; there is no "right" way to react to a domestic violence homicide of a victim. How and when to offer support to those in your organization can vary for each person and each incident. In the aftermath of a homicide, staff and volunteers often

### Takeaways:

- Check in with staff who worked with the victim
- Expect a wide range of reactions from staff after a domestic violence homicide

question themselves and their work – "What could we have done that may have prevented this homicide? How could this happen when we work so hard?" etc. Other times they may be overcome by feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, frustration, anger and sadness. Grief and healing are not linear and can be complex. Advocates may initially speak of feeling numb and only later start to experience and express their feelings.

Secondary trauma, indirect exposure to trauma, can also cause compassion fatigue.<sup>4</sup> Compassion fatigue leads to physical and emotional exhaustion from trauma that can have a negative impact on clients and advocacy. It is important to remind advocates that client deaths happen and can happen to anyone; it is not necessarily a reflection of their advocacy work. However, for some, a homicide brings the realization that this is not the work for them, and their work can never be quite enough, and they choose to move on.

## Prepare for a Domestic Violence Related Homicide

While we hope your community never experiences a domestic violence homicide, programs should spend some time planning to ensure a consistent, thoughtful and supportive response in the event of a domestic violence homicide or death of a victim. Items to consider include:

- Identify one or two staff members to partner with the executive director, forming a small internal team to work together in the event of a homicide or client death. Consider including a counselor who specializes in trauma who is not a staff member, such as a community partner that you have a relationship and work with so that you have a person/agency that you can contact for support immediately should a homicide happen.
- Involve staff in developing the organization's internal response plan.
- Seek input and ideas from survivors via support groups and/or a survivor advisory committee on what they feel is important to address and consider in the case of a domestic violence homicide in the community.
- Regularly review the program's confidentiality policy with staff, survivors, volunteers, board members and community partners, so that everyone is aware of what can and cannot be shared in the event of a domestic violence homicide, and/or in the event of the issuance of search warrants related to the incident. Also consider having staff annually sign a confidentiality document and discuss it at a staff meeting for any changes or updates.
- Engage in ongoing conversations with staff addressing not only the "to do" things, but also the realities of these situations and the effects on the program's activities and the community in general. Seek input from staff and volunteers regarding how to best support them if/when these incidents occur. Explore what "support" means to the organization, as well as what it means for survivors, staff, volunteers and board members specifically.
- Be clear in identifying each person's role, especially around responses and messages to the community and the media. Practice for a "critical incident" to ensure things run smoothly.

### Takeaways:

- Create a plan for the program to respond to a domestic violence homicide before one happens
- Clearly identify roles for all staff in the plan and store the plan in a place everyone can access — particularly, those who will speak to the press
- Discuss the plan and the possibility of a domestic violence homicide to provide staff an opportunity to share input, anxieties, and needs

<sup>1</sup> Adapted in part from "Domestic Violence Homicide Response Plan: A Toolkit for Domestic Violence Programs," End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin (March 2019)

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/ncadv\\_idaho\\_fact\\_sheet\\_2020.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/ncadv_idaho_fact_sheet_2020.pdf), citing Swerin D.D. & Kifer, M. (2018). Intimate partner and domestic violence in Idaho: 2009-2015. Idaho Statistical Analysis Center. Retrieved from <https://isp.idaho.gov/pgr/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/12/Domestic-Violence-in-Idaho-2009-2015-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/suicide-rates-by-state>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://mivan.org/resources-for-advocate-resilience/>

- Develop a guide for responding to calls for information from the media or others regarding a domestic violence homicide or death of a client. This document should:
  - Identify who within the organization will respond to these types of inquiries.
  - Include a “script” for staff or volunteers answering the phones. In addition to your agency’s “We cannot confirm or deny that any individual received services here” statement, you may wish to include language such as: *“All questions and concerns regarding this situation are being handled by our executive director. I can take a message and your phone number, and they will get back to you.”*
- Provide opportunities for staff, volunteers and board members to learn about different cultural practices in relation to death.

### Following a Homicide — Immediate Response

Once a program receives notification of a domestic violence homicide in its community, it is very important to consider what immediate action leadership should take for staff. Things you may want to consider in your immediate response include the following:

- If the victim was a client, immediately locate staff members who worked with the client and give them the news personally in a private setting.
- Consider providing paid time off to allow staff members to have time to care for themselves and process the grief.
- Provide free grief counseling for staff as needed.
- Encourage collective breathing exercises throughout the day and encourage movement and hydration.
- Consider forming an internal staff response committee who are further removed from the advocate-victim relationship who can organize a meal train or delivery of meals, ensure there is enough water in the office, and check in with staff most affected by the homicide. Gather all staff and assess any immediate needs and supports that the program can provide (make sure to reach out to the Idaho Coalition if you need help providing requested supports).
- Assess what is on the organizational and individual staff members’ schedules for the next week or more. Are staff able to carry through on their scheduled activities? If not, identify what needs to be covered and who can do it, and what can be let go. Things to consider include:
  - Who will take the lead on identifying others who can cover for those needing time away?
  - Is there a need to call in volunteers? Who will do that?
  - Also determine who will meet with other clients who may have known the victim or been in group sessions with them to provide immediate and ongoing support.

#### Takeaways:

- Locate staff who worked with victim and notify them personally of the homicide
- Coordinate grief counseling for staff, volunteers, survivors
- Review Program’s calendar and determine what tasks staff can let go of so they can process the homicide

### Following a Homicide — Continued Response

Continuing considerations for supporting staff and volunteers after a domestic violence homicide or death of a victim include, but are not limited to:

- Meet with staff and volunteers to discuss their wishes around what support they need.
- Plan how and when to meet for processing and support. Do they want to bring in someone from outside of the agency to facilitate the discussion?
  - Most programs find it beneficial to have time together soon after, allowing for each person to participate as they wish and feel able. They also recognize the need to gather at a later time. Discuss how to monitor these needs on a more long-term basis.
- All staff can provide a supportive environment by continuing to check in with each other and offering support to other staff and volunteers as needed.
- It could be helpful to do a group session with a professional to process as a team.
- For directors, this is a time to reach out to other program directors for support and assistance. A director can feel the overwhelming responsibility of taking care of everyone else.
- Other domestic violence programs may contact your program to offer assistance. Ask for what you need, and if you are unsure, ask for help processing through what happened. It is very common at these times to not even know what you need, but other directors and advocates are often willing to just listen and help problem solve.
- Welcome trauma-informed, culturally responsive rituals, practices, routines, and storytelling and consider meeting on a monthly or quarterly basis or as often as needed.
- Remind yourself that a client death does not mean you are in the wrong field or position. Client deaths can happen to anyone and it is not necessarily a reflection of your skills or relationship with them.

For long-term support, it is important for you to recognize and acknowledge the enormous impact this tragedy has on the entire organization, and the reality that for many, things are forever changed. If the grief is not processed, the impact and shock can show up later and could affect the way they show up for each other and for other survivors. Therefore, it is critical for staff to process through the experience together at some point when everyone is ready.

### Following a Homicide — Supporting Survivors

Considerations for supporting survivors after a domestic violence homicide in your community include:

- Identify if there are individuals who you work with now or have worked with in the past that may be especially impacted by the news. If so, identify someone who they are comfortable with to contact them. Make sure to use the contact methods you developed with each individual to ensure that contact from your program does not impact their safety.
- Identify who will be responsible for ensuring regular communication with impacted survivors.

#### Takeaways:

- Consistently check in with staff and assess needs
- Program directors should reach out to other programs for support
- Request for outside trauma-informed support to process

One program director who heard of a homicide in a nearby county immediately contacted the program serving the area the homicide occurred and was able to send a staff person to cover their crisis/phone lines for the day. This was an enormous help and allowed them the time they needed to make arrangements for the next few days.

- Determine if there is there a need to call in support from another domestic violence program. If so, identify who will do that and what steps should happen to ensure consistent and reliable services to survivors. For example, you may ask staff and volunteers from another program sign a confidentiality agreement and inform them of relevant program policies that they'll need to know.
- Assess if anything needs to be cancelled or rescheduled. Who will handle that?
- Review any prior feedback your agency received from survivors regarding what would be helpful to them. Implement those supports if possible.
- Coordinate a time and place for survivors to come together to process what happened if it is identified as a need.
- Identify how program staff can support any survivors who plan on attending the funeral.

### Takeaways:

- Safely implement individualized support for survivors who personally knew victim
- Identify staff responsible for regularly communicating with impacted survivors
- Request assistance from a nearby domestic violence program to be able to provide consistent, reliable services to survivors

## Confidentiality

Federal funders (VAWA, FVPSA, VOCA) and some state funders mandate that programs to maintain client confidentiality, even in death. After a domestic violence homicide or suicide occurs, community members often question whether programs made any effort to support a victim. If subject to the above-mentioned funding-based restrictions, programs can neither admit nor deny providing services to anyone. However, programs may explain what services and supports it offers to the community and provide hypothetical responses. Explain why confidentiality must be maintained and how confidentiality keeps survivors safe.

## Statements to the Media

Speaking to the media offers an opportunity to spread awareness about domestic violence and prevention. Oftentimes the media hesitates to contextualize the homicide within domestic violence. Programs should be ready to speak about domestic violence homicides in a way that protects confidentiality.

Programs should decide which staff member will speak to the media. This gives the spokesperson time to prepare and practice, as effectively speaking to the media requires being ready and familiar with talking points. Regardless of what the interviewer asks, the spokesperson should only respond to questions with the talking points and the information supporting each point. Programs may use the following statements as inspiration in drafting talking points that act as public education and prevention of domestic violence.

This resource offers some talking points for programs when speaking to reporters after a domestic violence homicide. They are designed to facilitate a rapid response and to help shape better coverage. The following goals should be kept in mind when developing talking points:

- Connect with the audience.
- Establish credibility/expertise.
- Define domestic violence.
- Provide context/scope of problem.
- Suggest positive community/individual action.

## Connect with the Audience

- We are deeply saddened to hear of the homicide of [victim's name]. Any loss of life is tragic, but the loss of life at the hands of someone who claimed to love and care for the victim can seem especially senseless.
- It's important we remember that any media coverage about this murder will inevitably fail to depict the complexity and fullness of their life and the impact that the homicide has had on surviving family members, friends, and others close to the victim, as well as those attempting to help during the immediate event or in the time preceding it.
- Our community has suffered a tremendous loss. It's important that we treat each other and ourselves with compassion at this time.
- It's time we ask ourselves how we as a community can better identify and safely intervene in these dangerous situations before they turn deadly. We all have a role to play in keeping our friends and neighbors safe.

## General Domestic Violence Information

- Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior in which a person engaged in abusive practices does everything they can to maintain power and control over their victim. It can involve verbal abuse, physical and sexual assault, controlling access to financial resources, abuse of pets, and isolation from friends and family.
- The Idaho Risk Assessment of Dangerousness includes seven factors that indicate an increased level of risk in an abusive relationship. Those indicators are: a history of domestic violence; threats to kill the victim or children; threats of suicide by the person using violence; recent separation; the use of obsessive or controlling behaviors; prior police contact with the person using violence; and drug or alcohol abuse by the person using violence.
- Statewide and nationally, domestic violence continues to be an enormous social epidemic.

## Domestic Violence Homicide

- Domestic violence is not about stress, depression or alcohol causing a person to be violent. Nor is it about a person "losing control" or "snapping." It is a calculated act by someone to control and intimidate the victim. Homicide is the ultimate form of power and control.
- Domestic violence homicide often occurs after or during the time that a victim attempts to leave the relationship. A person who abuses their partner may kill their partner because it's their final act of trying to control them.
- Domestic violence homicide rarely occurs as an isolated incident of abuse. Often there is a history of abuse in the relationship. We all need to be better at identifying the signs of abuse. However, there are times when we may never see the signs because the person abusing their partner deliberately isolates the victim from friends and family.
- The Idaho Risk Assessment of Dangerousness identifies risk factors that indicate an increased risk of lethality in a relationship. Those factors include forced sexual contact with the victim, stalking behaviors, current attempted strangulation, recent separation, and extreme possessiveness of the victim by the person using violence.
- Too often with these tragedies the focus is on the partner who carried out the homicide. Let's not forget about the life of [name of victim] and [his/her/their] family and friends. Think of your own family members or friends. Imagine what it would be like for this to happen to them. It should serve as a wakeup call for each of us to face the problem of domestic violence and how it affects our families and our community.

- A person who abuses their partner can seem like a “nice, normal person,” or even a respected member of the community, but still be abusive at home. Domestic violence is often a carefully guarded secret in homes that may otherwise appear normal. It can be very difficult for victims to seek help when their abusive partners are respected community figures because the victims’ claims of abuse are likely to be met with skepticism.
- Domestic violence homicides can happen anywhere, to anyone. We may not realize it, but we all likely know someone who has been affected by domestic violence.
- In the aftermath of a domestic violence homicide, the focus often turns to what the victim did or did not do “to cause” the violence. This is blaming the victim and suggests we should excuse this tragic killing. The focus should instead be on why the person who murdered their partner thought [he/she/they] had the right to take a person’s life. To prevent domestic violence and homicide, we as a community must send a consistent, strong message that all abuse is unacceptable.

### Services Available and A Call to Action

- [Name of agency] serves [use accurate, specific numbers] of survivors every year through programs such as [name examples, such as shelter, helpline, etc.]. We have been serving survivors here since [founding year].
- Domestic violence continues to be an underreported problem. Most people first talk to those in their lives whom they trust. Because of this, each of us needs to educate ourselves about domestic violence and know about the local services that are available to help [provide details about local helpline, shelter, etc.].
- We must take all forms of domestic violence seriously to help prevent further abuse or death. People who harm their partners are dangerous, and all of their abusive tactics must be treated seriously. What may have been yelling, throwing things, or shoving yesterday can turn deadly tomorrow.
- It takes all of us working together to address this problem—health care institutions, schools, media, business leaders, faith communities, legislators, and advocacy and service organizations. We need to prioritize the effort to stop domestic violence every day and not wait to talk about it only when a high-profile tragedy like this occurs.

## Media Talking Points for Specific Scenarios

### Murder-Suicide

- Murder-suicides commonly occur in domestic violence cases.<sup>5</sup> The person who murders their partner, statistically usually a man, kills one or more victims, usually a wife or intimate partner, and then commits suicide within minutes or hours. It is important to be aware of the correlation between people who are suicidal abusing their partner and the potential for homicide.
- When a murder-suicide occurs, communities are left struggling to find an answer or motive for why the murder occurred without the ability to hold the person accountable for their actions.
- Children and others can be killed during a domestic violence murder-suicide.<sup>6</sup> However, there is typically one primary intended victim, usually the spouse or partner. When children are killed instead of the intended victim, it may be that the person is attempting to further hurt the intended victim by taking away what the victim most values or loves.

<sup>5, 6</sup> <https://vpc.org/studies/amroul2015.pdf>

### Multiple Homicide Victims

- While most people who carry out domestic violence homicides do not present a safety threat to anyone other than their intimate partners and in some cases their children, some will take out anyone they perceive to be “in the way,” such as other family or household members, friends, co-workers, or bystanders.<sup>7</sup>
- People who are physically violent to their partners seek to control all aspects of their victims’ lives. Some will threaten or harm members of the victim’s extended family, her friends and associates, or those who try to help her. When this happens, these people are also considered victims.

### LGBTQ Homicide

- The underreporting, mis-gendering and incorrect reporting of LGBTQ domestic violence homicides often mean these relationships are not acknowledged in our communities. It’s important to accurately speak about the nature of the relationship between the parties when these situations occur, so long as that information is public and would not violate confidentiality. Not doing so perpetuates the isolation that people in same-sex relationships feel, especially in the rural parts of our state.
- We must acknowledge that domestic violence in LGBTQ relationships exists and utilize the tools available to us to appropriately identify and respond to these situations before they turn deadly.

### Victim Uses Deadly Force

- We don’t condone the taking of any life, but it’s important to distinguish between murders committed in self-defense and those whose purpose is revenge or to punish the homicide victim for their behavior. It is self-defense when the victim kills out of fear that they (or others in the household) will be harmed or killed. This fear is generated by a pattern of coercion, threats and/or assaults from the person engaging in the abusive behavior. In these situations, the threat of harm is real even if it’s not immediate or readily apparent to others.
- Sorting out self-defense is complicated. The legal definition is strict and predicated upon them having a “reasonable cause to and did believe their lives would be endangered if they refused.” It’s important to look closely into how weapons are used and what led to the homicide.
- Deadly force is rarely used in response to a first or one-time abusive event. It’s important to talk to family, friends, co-workers and others to try to understand the history between those involved. Some victims of domestic violence suffer years in silence. Prior abuse is often not reported to others out of fear. This fear and isolation can push victims to the edge.

### When Children are Killed

- It’s critical not to blame the victim for the death of their children when they are a victim, as well. Some people who are abusive in relationships use children as a tactic of coercion and control against the victim, including threats to abduct or kill the children, particularly when the victim tries to leave the relationship.
- People who carry out violence against their partners often engage in legal fights over custody and physical placement of a mutual child to have ongoing control over their ex-partners. One of reason for returning to an abusive relationship may be fear that the person abusing will act on the threats of taking the children from the victim.

<sup>7</sup> <https://vpc.org/studies/amroul2015.pdf>

## Alcohol & Drugs

- Alcohol and other drug use do not cause domestic violence in relationships that are not otherwise abusive. While many victims report that their partners may be more violent when using alcohol or drugs, it is important to understand that alcohol or drug use only exacerbates an existing pattern of abusive behavior. We must recognize that the root problem is about a person feeling entitled to control their partner, whether or not alcohol or drugs are involved.
- Many victims of domestic violence may commit crimes due to coercion or threats by their person abusing them. These victims choose the risk of breaking the law because it is safer than the risk of refusing the demands of their partner.
- In the event of an overdose in shelter:
  - While every circumstance is different, it is an unfortunate reality that many victims rely on alcohol and drugs to numb themselves to the pain of domestic abuse.
  - Alcohol and drug use are common coping mechanisms for domestic abuse victims and sometimes a tactic people who abuse use to keep the victim dependent on them.<sup>8</sup>
  - Our entire community is grappling with a drug epidemic. Because our program is a microcosm of the community, unfortunately we are also seeing drug use by some victims in our shelter.

## Mental Illness

- Most mental health illnesses do not cause abusive behavior, and most people who carry out violence against their partner are not mentally ill. In some instances, mental health illness can exacerbate an existing pattern of abusive behavior or play a role in the escalation of violence. But mental health illness remains only a contributing factor.
- The cause of domestic violence is related to the belief that a person is entitled to treat their partner as they see fit, even if this involves the use of intimidation, cruelty or violence. At this time psychological tests are not reliable predictors of who will engage in domestic violence.

## Law Enforcement-Involved

- When a person who carries out a domestic violence homicide works in law enforcement or a similar position, community members often wonder how such a person could gain employment in this field. Domestic abuse is often an invisible crime. Many people who hurt their partners are never arrested, and there is often no public record of their violent behavior. People who are violent towards their partners are frequently successful in keeping the abuse a secret, making excuses, or blaming the victim.
- The victim and their friends and family may help hide or minimize domestic violence to protect the reputation of the victim's partner. For most of our history, public opinion has supported the notion that acts of domestic violence are private matters.
- When a police officer carries out domestic violence, it severely limits the ability and willingness of the victim to seek help because of fears they will not be believed or that first responders will protect their own.

<sup>8</sup> Afifi et al (2009). Mental health correlates of intimate partner violence in marital relationships in a nationally representative sample of males and females. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(8), p.1398-1417.

## Gun Violence

- Many people who abuse their partners use guns to threaten and control victims. These threats often escalate to murder. Every month in the United States, an average of 52 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner and nearly 1 million women alive today have reported being shot or shot at by intimate partners.<sup>9</sup>
- In Idaho, the movement of a weapon in conjunction with a threat is an indicator of a continued likelihood of risk in an abusive relationship.<sup>10</sup>
- When family, friends, co-workers, and community members learn that a person who is abusing their partner is also a gun-owner, it is vital for them to remove guns from the home.

## Cultural Sensitivity to Honor the Victim

Programs offer services to all who fit the criteria for accessing these services. That means clients are from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. When a program is asked by the community to support community events in honor of a homicide victim, it is imperative that the program follow the leadership of the victim's family and community. Further trauma occurs when a program uses practices that are not culturally relevant to the victim and the victim's community, family, and friends. If a program is unsure what to do, it is important to begin connecting with community leaders now, before a crisis occurs, to establish relationships in providing culturally responsive services to all survivors. That way, when a crisis occurs, the program will be ready to request guidance provided by community leaders from the victim's specific community.

## The Idaho Coalition Supports Programs

The Idaho Coalition understands that Programs experience intense and overwhelming feelings after a domestic violence homicide happens in the community. The Idaho Coalition provides limited support programs in a number of ways including financial support for group grief counseling for staff, support on making statements to the media, providing samples of press statements, limited financial support to carry out culturally specific activities in the aftermath for community events. The Idaho Coalition wants to ensure programs have what they need to support their staff and the community in the aftermath of a domestic violence homicide. If you need something, please ask.

<sup>9</sup> *Guns and Violence Against Women: America's Uniquely Lethal Intimate Partner Violence Problem* (2019): <https://everytownresearch.org/report/guns-and-violence-against-women-americas-uniquely-lethal-intimate-partner-violence-problem/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://everytownresearch.org/issue/domestic-violence/> Idaho Risk Assessment of Dangerousness.

### Takeaways:

- Programs cause more harm with public events that are not culturally relevant to the victim or the victim's community
- Programs must follow the lead of community in offering culturally relevant events to commemorate the victim

### Takeaways:

- Idaho Coalition can provide support to programs responding to domestic violence homicides
- Please ask for what you need!



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