

# *A Matter of Life and Death*

# 2017 Annual Report

**Fourth Judicial District  
Domestic Fatality Review Team**

*A Collaboration of Private, Public and Nonprofit  
Organizations Operating in Hennepin County*



## **Project Chair:**

The Honorable Fred Karasov  
Minnesota Fourth Judicial District

## **2017 Community Partners:**

Battered Women's Legal Advocacy Project (Standpoint)  
Bloomington City Attorney's Office  
Community Volunteers  
Create Impact Consulting  
Eden Prairie Police Department  
Hamline University  
Minneapolis City Attorney's Office  
Minneapolis Police Department  
Paradigm Counseling  
South Lake Minnetonka Police Department

## **2016 County and State Partners:**

Minnesota Fourth Judicial District Court  
Minnesota Fourth Judicial District Court Administration  
Hennepin County Attorney's Office  
Hennepin County Domestic Abuse Service Center  
Hennepin County Community Corrections & Rehabilitation  
Hennepin County Family Court Services  
Hennepin County Child Protection  
Hennepin County Medical Examiner  
Hennepin County Public Defender's Office  
Hennepin County Sheriff

## **This report is a product of:**

Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team

## **For more information please contact:**

The Honorable Fred Karasov  
Minnesota Fourth Judicial District  
Project Chair  
612-348-6405  
or  
Deena Anders  
Project Director  
651-263-2901

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



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# Acknowledgments

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The Honorable Fred Karasov, Project Chair, gratefully acknowledges the supporters and members of the Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team:

The Hennepin County Board of Commissioners, whose financial contribution makes the continued work of the Team possible;

The friends and family members of homicide victims who share memories of their loved ones and reflect on the tragedy of their deaths;

The Review Team and Advisory Board members who give their time generously, work tirelessly, and share their experience and wisdom in the review of each case;

The leaders of partner organizations who willingly commit staff time to the Team and encourage changes in procedures based on the Team's findings. By doing so, these leaders send a clear message to the justice system and the community about the importance of addressing domestic violence;

The agencies and individuals who promptly and generously provide documents and information critical to case reviews;

The Office of the Hennepin County Medical Examiner for providing space for the Team meetings.



# Executive Summary

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The Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team members examine cases of domestic homicide that have occurred within Hennepin County. Each year themes emerge from the cases reviewed, sometimes related to communication processes, other times about the alignment of policies to identified best practices, last year the cases reviewed by the Team brought to light how partnerships between practitioners could enhance intervention and promote healing. Ideas for these partnerships include: non-profit providers to offer free psychological assessment/evaluation at the jails or other correction locations to facilitate completion and working with school counselors to develop a follow-up protocol for children following incidents of abuse.

The Team also identified two opportunities for policy changes that could have a positive impact on statewide domestic violence response. First, the expansion of the newly adopted Fourth Judicial District Family Court practice of scheduling review hearings on Orders for Protection and secondly, the development of a funding stream that would allow people who have experienced strangulation in an assault to be transported to the hospital and receive a forensic examination free of charge.

In 2017, as in all years, the Team recognized the need for greater awareness about the signs and consequences of domestic violence. Specifically, based on the cases reviewed, the Team saw an opportunity for increasing the alertness of the both the general public and people experiencing violence to symptoms of head injuries following assault.

Finally, the Team developed several opportunities for criminal justice system partners related to both identifying indicators of the probability of escalated violence and ways that the court response to victims can provide factors of protection.

# Guiding Standards

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**The perpetrator is solely responsible for the homicide.**

The Review Team recognizes that the responsibility for the homicide rests with the person who committed the crime. That said, we also recognize that agencies and individuals can sometimes improve how they handle and respond to cases of domestic violence prior to the homicide.

**Every finding in this report is prompted by details of specific homicides.**

Many Review Team members have extensive experience with domestic assault cases. Consequently, it is tempting to draw on that broader experience, which may or may not be relevant when making findings in the review of a specific murder. The Review Team thus established a procedure to guarantee that all findings are based only on the specific cases reviewed.

**The Review Team reviews only cases in which prosecution is completed.**

All prosecution must be completed before cases are reviewed. In addition to allowing all participants to discuss cases freely, the passage of time also allows some of the emotion and tension surrounding them to dissipate, generating more openness and honesty during the review process.

**Findings are based primarily on information contained within official reports and records regarding the individuals involved in the homicide before and after the crime.**

Whenever possible, information is supplemented by interviews with friends, family members, or service providers associated with the case. The findings of the Review Team are limited to the availability of information reported by these sources.

**The Review Team occasionally uses the words “appear” or “apparent” when it believes certain actions may have occurred but cannot locate specific details in the documents or interviews to support our assumptions.**

**Many incidents that reflect exemplary responses to domestic violence, both inside and outside the justice system, are not included.**

Instead, this report focuses on areas that need improvement.

**The Review Team appreciates that several of the agencies that had contact with some of the perpetrators or victims in the cases reviewed have made or are making changes to procedures and protocols since these homicides occurred.**

However, the observations included in this report are based on our review of actual case histories and what was in place at the time of the homicide.

**The Review Team attempts to reach consensus on every recommended intervention.**

While every recommendation is fully discussed by the Review Team, not every recommendation is supported by every member. The Review Team represents a wide variety of positions and complete consensus is not always obtainable.

**We will never know if the recommended interventions could have prevented any of the deaths cited in this report.**

We do know, in most instances, that the response to the danger in the relationship could have been improved.

**The Review Team operates with a high level of trust rooted in confidentiality and immunity from liability among committed participants.**

This process fosters honest introspection about policies, procedures, and criminal justice system responsiveness.

**The Review Team does not conduct statistical analysis and does not review a statistically significant number of cases.**

Actual numbers, not percentages, are used to ensure that analyses are not misleading.

**The findings should not, alone, be used to assess risk in other cases.**

Cases with similar scenarios will not necessarily result in the same outcome. However, the findings do address situations of potential danger for victims.

# Presence of Risk Factors

It is not possible to accurately predict when a perpetrator of domestic violence may kill the victim of abuse. However, researchers\* have identified approximately 20 factors that are often present in cases of domestic homicide. The Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team notes the presence of risk factors in the reviewed cases because public awareness of risk factors for homicide is an opportunity for intervention.

Potential Predictors of Homicide	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
The violence had increased in severity and frequency during the year prior to the homicide.	X	X	X
Perpetrator had access to a gun.	X	X	X
Victim had attempted to leave the abuser.	X	X	X
Perpetrator was unemployed.	X	X	X
Perpetrator had previously used a weapon to threaten or harm victim.	X	X	X
Perpetrator had threatened to kill the victim.	X	X	
Perpetrator had previously avoided arrest for domestic violence.	X	X	
Victim had children not biologically related to the perpetrator.	X		
Perpetrator sexually assaulted victim.	X	X	
Perpetrator had a history of substance abuse.	X	X	
Perpetrator had previously strangled victim.	X	X	
Perpetrator attempted to control most or all of victim's activities.	X	X	X
Violent and constant jealousy.	X	X	X
Perpetrator was violent to victim during her pregnancy.	n/a	X	n/a
Perpetrator threatened to commit suicide.		X	X
Victim believed perpetrator would kill her.		X	
Perpetrator exhibited stalking behavior.		X	X
Perpetrator with significant history of violence.	X		
Victim had contact with a domestic violence advocate. (this is a protective factor)		X	

# Homicide Data

For the purposes of the Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team, domestic abuse is defined as a pattern of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and/or stalking behaviors that occur within intimate or family relationships between spouses, individuals in dating relationships, former partners and against parents by children. This pattern of behavior is used by the abuser to establish and maintain control over the victim. Occasionally the Team reviews homicides that occurred in the context of domestic violence but in which the victim is not the primary victim of the abuse.

In 2015, at least 22 women, 3 men, and 4 children, were killed by current or former intimate partners, as well as 5 family members/interveners, in the state of Minnesota. Ten of these homicides occurred in Hennepin County and the Fatality Review Team reviewed one of these cases in 2017.

<i>Cause of Death</i>	<i>Age of Victim</i>	<i>Gender of Victim</i>	<i>Relationship of Perpetrator to Victim</i>
Gunshot	21	Female	Boyfriend
Strangulation	36	Female	Boyfriend
Gunshot	48	Female	Husband
Gunshot	17	Male	Father
Gunshot	15	Female	Father
Gunshot	14	Female	Father
Gunshot	48	Female	Husband
Gunshot	15	Female	Step-father
Stabbing	48	Female	Husband
Gunshot	25	Female	Boyfriend

In 2016, at least 18 women were killed by current or former intimate partners, 2 children were killed by their father, as well as a bystander, in the state of Minnesota. Six of these homicides occurred in Hennepin County and the Fatality Review Team reviewed two of these cases in 2017.

<i>Cause of Death</i>	<i>Age of Victim</i>	<i>Gender of Victim</i>	<i>Relationship of Perpetrator to Victim</i>
Complex Homicidal Violence	28	Female	Boyfriend
Stabbing	23	Female	Husband
Gunshot	31	Female	Husband
Gunshot	13	Male	Father
Gunshot	10	Female	Father
Vehicular Homicide	37	Male	None

# 2017 Opportunities

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The Review Team examines cases of domestic homicide and the lives of those involved, looking for points of contact between various agencies or individuals, the person killed, and the person who committed the homicide. Review Team members examine the case chronologies and make observations about elements of the case. Sometimes the observations assist in identifying the context of the crime, other times they illuminate a potential missed opportunity to avoid the homicide. From these observations, the Team identifies Opportunities for Intervention that correspond to the observations. Below are those Opportunities for Intervention identified in 2017.

## **Policy Change**

- Establish funding stream to support forensic exam in all cases of strangulation akin to the system that provides a forensic exam following sexual assault.
- Encourage adoption of best practice to incorporate periodic review hearings into process for Orders for Protection

## **Primary Prevention**

- Develop primary prevention campaign for middle school and high school to help kids know who to talk to if they see injuries to friends or family members.
- Incorporate Healthy Relationships curriculum in K-12
- Increase awareness among friends and family of signs of traumatic brain injury following incidents of head injuries.

## **Provider Partnerships**

- Develop partnership to provide access to free psychological assessment/evaluation by non-profit providers in jails, at probation offices, and other locations frequented by those who may be required by the court to undergo assessment but do not have the funds to access the services.
- Offer resource for intervention services related to domestic abuse for all parties involved, including children, even in the absence of prosecution or conviction to promoting the resource as harm reduction rather than punitive consequence. Referrals can be offered at any contact- at the scene, upon release from jail.
- Consider wrap-around MICD services to include a review of criminal justice system involvement and a case plan that incorporates services to help mitigate criminal behaviors.

- When domestic abuse occurs in the presence of children, consider implementing a follow-up protocol by school counselors.

### **Child Protection**

- Collect factual evidence that accounts for the dynamics of domestic violence before removing children from parental custody.
- When considering an out-of-home kinship placement, incorporate information about the intergenerational nature of domestic abuse and conduct more intensive screening for safe placement.

### **Criminal Justice System**

- In cases of domestic abuse, it is essential that court calendars be structured for fast and consistent response. A dedicated calendar with small number of assigned judges is a way to achieve this outcome.
- Judicial Officers develop an understanding of the manner that probation enforces court orders (like no use or dv programming) and how probation determines the level of programming.
- When a petitioner files a motion to dismiss an Order for Protection, court may inquire as to whether that person has had a chance to meet with an advocates and offer time for the petitioner to do so before ordering the dismissal.
- Explore the development of a process or protocol to escalate responses in cases where interventions are in place but abuser continues to openly threaten harm or admit to or admissions of continued abusive behavior (criminal or otherwise).
- Identify the use of children- particularly taking and refusing to return a child- in perpetrating abuse as a red flag for escalation.

# Project History

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The Fatality Review process in Hennepin County began in 1998 when WATCH, a nonprofit court monitoring organization, received a planning grant from the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. As part of its work, WATCH had routinely created chronologies of cases involving chronic domestic abusers and published those chronologies in a newsletter. While creating chronologies, WATCH often became aware of missed opportunities for holding abusers accountable. The organization felt strongly that, in the vast majority of cases, these opportunities were not missed because of carelessness or disinterest on the part of the individuals handling the cases. Instead, many opportunities were missed because adequate and accurate information was not available at critical decision points and because the sheer volume of domestic abuse cases created significant pressure to resolve them quickly, oftentimes forcing an outcome that was less than ideal.

While attending a National District Attorneys Conference in 1997, a WATCH staff member learned about a movement to conduct Domestic Fatality Reviews, a movement that was gaining interest nationwide and that appeared to address many of the organization's concerns about the many places where chronic abusers could slip through the cracks of the justice system. When WATCH learned about the availability of planning funds from the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, it applied for, and soon after received, a \$25,000 planning grant to determine the potential for establishing such a project in Hennepin County.

If representatives from the justice system and community agencies determined that such an effort was feasible, the grant called for an organization that would lay the foundation for the project. Upon receipt of funding, WATCH put together an Advisory Board of representatives from the primary public and private agencies that handle domestic violence cases. The Advisory Board included representatives from District Court, City and County Attorney, Police, Public Defender, Probation and Victim Advocacy Services, meeting up to four times a month.

Enthusiasm for the project was high from the outset. Consequently the Advisory Board spent very little time on the feasibility study and soon began laying out the framework for the project to be established in the Fourth Judicial District. It began with an extensive research effort to gather information from jurisdictions that had already implemented fatality review teams, gaining extremely valuable information in this process. Many jurisdictions stressed the importance of having enabling legislation to create the project and to lay the framework for the project to go forward with multiagency participation. This would assist in creating a non-blaming environment and help to assure the neutral review of cases.

During the process of developing the proposed legislation, the Advisory Board assembled a larger Planning Committee comprised of 34 members representing private, public and nonprofit agencies and organizations to gain a variety of perspectives on particular topics and to develop broader support for the project. The

Planning Committee worked primarily on establishing a definition of domestic homicide and on identifying who should be represented on the Review Team. Once critical decisions had been made about participation and structure, the existing Advisory Board worked with Senate counsel to put together legislation that would create and fund the project. The legislation also included important data privacy and immunity provisions that would enable the project to gain access to confidential records related to these cases and provide immunity to those who spoke openly to the Fatality Review Team about case information.

A proposal to create and fund the pilot passed during the 1999 session. However, for technical reasons the data privacy and immunity provisions were taken out of the enabling legislation. This language was critical to the success of the project, since many agencies were interested in providing information to facilitate the fatality review process but were not able to do so under existing statutes without suffering significant penalties.

The Advisory Board returned to the legislature during the 2000 session to pursue the data privacy and immunity provisions. The legislation passed and was signed by the Governor. It became effective on August 1, 2000. In 2004, the State Legislature granted an extension to these provisions until June 2006. In 2006, the Team was granted another extension, this time to December 2008. In 2009, the legislature made permanent the data access that enables the work of the Team and extended the opportunity to develop a Fatality Review Team to all Judicial Districts in Minnesota with Statute 611A.203.

As other judicial districts begin to consider starting fatality review teams, the Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team formalized its practices and processes in preparing to provide technical assistance to new and forming teams. Advisory Board modified an earlier draft charter used by the Team and in January 2011 the Team adopted its first By-Laws.

One of the most noticeable changes that resulted from this effort was the name of the Team. Instead of A Matter of Life and Death: Hennepin Domestic Fatality Review Team A Collaboration of Private, Public and Non-profit Organizations Operating in Hennepin County, the Team is now officially named Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team which better defines both the scope and geographic focus of the Team. The By-Laws also set the length of service on the Team to two-year terms and limit the number of terms that one can serve to three consecutive with the option of rejoining after a year off. The Team greatly benefits from having long time members who maintain an organizational memory but also thrives on the ideas and perspective newer members are able to bring to the process. This structure of term limits allows the Team to maintain both components in the work.

### ***Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team***

#### ***Purpose***

*The purpose of the Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team is to examine deaths resulting from domestic violence in order to identify the circumstances that led to the homicide(s).*

#### ***Goal***

*The goal is to discover factors that will prompt improved identification, intervention and prevention efforts in similar cases. It's important to emphasize that the purpose is not to place blame for the death, but rather to actively improve all systems that serve persons involved with domestic abuse.*

# Structure & Processes

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## The Review Team Structure

The enabling Legislation requires that the Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team have up to 35 members and include representatives from the following organizations or professions:

- The Medical Examiner;
- A Judicial Court Officer (Judge or referee);
- A County and City Attorney and a public defender;
- The County Sheriff and a peace officer;
- A representative from Family Court Services and the Department of Corrections;
- A physician familiar with domestic violence issues;
- A representative from district court administration and DASC;
- A public citizen representative or a representative from a civic organization;
- A mental health professional; and
- Domestic violence advocates or shelter workers (3 positions)

The Team also has representatives from community organizations and citizen volunteers.

Review Team members are appointed by the District IV Chief Judge and serve two year terms of service. There is one paid staff person who supports the Team in the role of Project Director.

The Review Team is governed by the Advisory Board, which is also the policy-making and strategic oversight body. The Advisory Board is made up of members of the Review Team with at least six months of experience. The Chair of the Review Team leads the Advisory Board and appoints Advisory Board members for two year terms.

## Case Selection

The Fatality Review Team reviews only cases which are closed to any further prosecution. In addition, all cases - such as a homicide/suicide where no criminal prosecution would take place - are at least one year old when they are reviewed. This policy is based on the advice of several jurisdictions that were already well

versed in the review process. In their experience, letting time pass after the incident allowed some of the emotion and tension to dissipate, thus allowing for more open and honest discussion during case reviews.

The Project Director uses information provided by the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women's Femicide Report and homicide records from the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office to determine which cases to review. The Team reviews a mix of cases that differ from one another based on race, location of the homicide and gender of the perpetrator.

## **The Case Review**

After a case is selected for Team review, the Project Director sends requests for agencies to provide documents and reviews the information. Police and prosecution files typically provide the bulk of information and identify other agencies that may have records important in reviewing the case.

The Project Director reviews the records to develop a chronology of the case. The chronology is a step by step account of lives of the victim and perpetrator, their relationship, incidents of domestic violence, events that occurred immediately prior to the homicide and the homicide itself. Names of police, prosecutors, social workers, doctors, or other professionals involved in the case are not used.

A designated person from the Team contacts members of the family of the victim to inform them that the Review Team is reviewing the case and to see if they are willing and interested in providing information and reflections on the case.

This chronology is sent to Review Team members prior to the case review meeting, and documents from the police records, prosecution records and, typically, medical records are sent to members of the team. Two team members are assigned to review each of these records, one member from the agency that provided the information and one who has an outside perspective.

Each Review Team meeting begins with members signing a confidentiality agreement. At the meeting, individuals who reviewed the case report their findings. The Team then develops a series of observations related to the case. Small groups of Team members use these observations to identify opportunities for intervention that may have prevented the homicide. The small groups then present their findings to the full Review Team, which discusses the issues and opportunities. The Review Team records key issues, observations and opportunities for intervention related to each case.

# Review Team Members

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Linda Berberoglu, PhD\*,\*\*

Senior Clinical Forensic Psychologist  
Fourth Judicial District Court

Janice Blackmon

Supervisor— Seward Neighborhood Probation  
Hennepin County Community Corrections &  
Rehabilitation

Bernie Bogenreif\*,\*\*

Detective  
Hennepin County Sheriff's Office

Raquel Calles<sup>‡</sup>

Advocate  
Casa de Esperanza

Pat Chelmo

Detective  
Hennepin County Sheriff's Office

Mike Condon\*

Career Probation Officer— Adult Division  
Hennepin County Community Corrections &  
Rehabilitation

Carrie Crockford, MA, LMFT

Men's Program Supervisor  
Domestic Abuse Project

Pam DeWitt-Meza

Labor & Delivery Nurse/SARS Nurse  
Hennepin County Medical Center

Valerie Estrada

Corrections Unit Supervisor  
Hennepin County Community Corrections &  
Rehabilitation

Bruce Folkens

Commander, Special Crimes Investigation  
Minneapolis Police Department

Tara Ferguson-Lopez

Assistant County Attorney  
Hennepin County Attorney's Office

Erica Glassberg

Assistant City Attorney  
Bloomington City Attorney's Office

Sarah Greenman, PhD

Assistant Professor  
Criminal Justice & Forensic Science  
Hamline University

Chela Guzman\*

Attorney  
Hennepin County Public Defender's Office

Michelle Hatcher

Assistant County Attorney  
Hennepin County Attorney's Office

Loretta Huffman

Child Protection Program Manager  
Hennepin County Child Protection Investigations  
Unit

The Honorable Fred Karasov\*

Judicial Officer  
Fourth Judicial District Court

Deirdre Keys\*\*

Advocacy Support Program Manager  
StandPoint (formerly BWLAP)

Appendix C

Neal Margolies  
Supervisor– Adult Division  
Hennepin County Community Corrections &  
Rehabilitation

Chris Millard  
Detective  
Eden Prairie Police Department

Stephanie Morgan  
Assistant County Attorney– Juvenile  
Hennepin County Attorney’s Office

Christine Olson  
Officer  
South Lake Minnetonka Police Department

Linnea Olson  
Probation Officer  
Hennepin County Community Corrections &  
Rehabilitation

Jen Prax  
Family Court Services  
Hennepin County Community Corrections &  
Rehabilitation

Marcy Podkopacz<sup>‡</sup>  
District Court Administration  
Fourth Judicial District Court

Bruce Renken<sup>‡</sup>  
Senior Clinical Forensic Psychologist  
Fourth Judicial District Court

Kathy Rygh\*\*  
Assistant City Attorney  
Minneapolis City Attorney’s Office

Lindsay Siolka<sup>‡</sup>  
Attorney  
Hennepin County Public Defender’s Office

\* Member of Advisory Board

\*\* Resigned the Team in 2017

‡ Joined Team in 2017





*Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team*

**Project Chair:**

The Honorable Fred Karasov  
Minnesota Fourth Judicial District

Deena Anders, Project Director  
651-263-2901  
[deena@amatteroflifeanddeath.org](mailto:deena@amatteroflifeanddeath.org)

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