



2020 Legislative Session: Domestic Violence Update

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Thank you for taking testimony today on domestic violence in Vermont. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is Vermont's leading voice on domestic and sexual violence in our state. We represent 15 independent, non-profit Member Organizations throughout the state¹ which provide advocacy and support to victims of domestic and sexual violence. Together these organizations provide 24-hour access to crisis hotlines, emergency shelter, legal and medical advocacy and support and serve every square mile of Vermont.

Domestic Violence in Vermont

Although Vermont has the second lowest overall violent crime rate in the country², our state experiences a serious and persistent problem with domestic violence. Although often hidden from view, Vermonters across our state experience violence in their homes. Although perpetrators may have mental health or substance abuse issues, domestic violence is not caused by those issues - domestic violence is an escalating pattern of coercion and control which may include physical violence, and psychological and financial abuse. Domestic violence has widespread and devastating impacts on families, child development, community health and wellbeing and Vermont's economy.³

In 2019, our Member Organizations answered 18,921 hotline calls from people seeking assistance, an increase of over 1,000 calls from the previous year. Our Member Organizations also provided in-person help to 8,760 individuals in 2019, also an increase compared to the previous calendar year. Although the number of people reaching out to Vermont Network Member Organizations continues to grow, statewide and national surveys indicate that the number of people who experience domestic violence far exceeds the number of those who reach out for help in any given year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in four women and one in ten men experience violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime⁴. These rates would indicate that within Vermont's current population⁵, approximately 80,000 Vermont women and 30,000 Vermont men have or will experience domestic violence in their lifetime.

¹ <https://vtnetwork.org/member-program/>

² FBI Crime in the U.S. 2006-2018

³ The Vermont Network has commissioned a study on the economic cost of domestic and sexual violence to Vermont and will be releasing a report on findings in the spring of 2019.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Violence Prevention, 2019

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate



Domestic Violence Homicide

Domestic violence in its most severe forms continues to be a major challenge to Vermont. The number of felony domestic violence cases in Vermont continues to grow. Over the past ten years, felony domestic violence charges have increased 47%⁶, indicating that severe physical violence is one key characteristic of the domestic violence problem in Vermont. Of concern is Vermont's persistent and high rate of domestic violence homicide. Since 1994, half of all homicides in Vermont have been domestic violence related. A recent report from the Violence Policy Center ranks Vermont 8th in the nation in our rate of females murdered by males.⁷ This annual report analyzes femicide data, including the relationship between the victims and the responsible party. Because Vermont's homicide numbers are comparatively small, our national ranking has varied widely year to year, but Vermont has been in the top 10 ranked states twice in the past five years.

Deadly Relationship between Firearms and Domestic Violence

There is a deadly relationship between firearms and domestic violence homicide in our state. Firearms are the most commonly used weapons in domestic violence homicides in Vermont, and the majority of those homicides include use of a firearm. The rate of firearms usage in domestic violence related murder-suicides is higher still, at 75%.⁸

In order to address this deadly relationship, last year Vermont applied for the Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Technical Assistance Project. We were selected as one of five sites across the country to participate. This national project is a collaboration of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and Firearms and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. The primary project partners in Vermont include the Vermont Network, the Vermont Attorney General's Office, the Vermont Judiciary and the Vermont State Police. The goals of the project include assessing the issues related to domestic violence and firearms in Vermont, providing intensive technical assistance from an array of national experts on areas of focus, and disseminating model policies and lessons learned from elsewhere in the country. To date, the project conducted a survey to identify key issues related to domestic violence and firearms in Vermont, hosted a kick-off meeting with over 50 project partners, and identified key areas of focus for the length of the project.

⁶ Vermont Judiciary Annual Statistical Report for FY17, p. 27.

⁷ Violence Policy Center, *When Men Murder Women*, September 2019

⁸ 2018 Vermont Fatality Review Commission Report



The Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Technical Assistance Project is in the beginning stages of hearing from stakeholders in order to ascertain key areas of focus for the three-year project. Several areas of interest to date include:

- Variation and lack of consistency in whether or how firearms are ordered removed or surrendered as part of criminal domestic violence cases and relief from abuse order proceedings.
- Challenges with enforcement of federal firearms prohibitions.
- Lack of compliance assurance and monitoring for firearms surrender in criminal and civil cases.
- Continued issues with firearms storage at the local level.

In 2018, recognizing the relationship between firearms and domestic violence homicides, the General Assembly enacted Act 92 – removing firearms at the scene of a domestic violence incident. This was one step forward in addressing this deadly relationship. The Vermont Network looks forward to working together this session to enact further legislation to address the root causes of homicide and prevent its devastating impacts on victims and our communities.