



H.222 – Domestic Violence Accountability Program & Relief from Abuse Prevention Orders
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February 25, 2025

Thank you for the invitation to speak with the committee about H.222. I am joined today by my colleague Heather Holter, Co-Director of the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence.

On behalf of the Vermont Network and our 15 Member Organizations, I am pleased to testify in support of H.222, which would explicitly authorize the court to include completion of a Domestic Violence Accountability Program as a condition of a final relief from abuse order.

Overview of Relief from Abuse Orders

Domestic violence protection orders – also called relief from abuse orders (RFAs) – are a critical legal tool for survivors of domestic violence. They are civil court orders requested directly by a victim (plaintiff). If granted, the orders offer important protective measures to prevent future harm, including requiring a perpetrator of violence to maintain physical distance from a survivor.

In applying for an order, survivors can request various forms of relief to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. The statute explicitly lists forms of relief the court may order for the period the RFA is in effect.

H.222 proposes adding completion of a domestic violence accountability program to the forms of available relief listed in the statute, which is a recommendation in the 2024 Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission Report.

Overview of Domestic Violence Accountability Programs

Domestic Violence Accountability Programs (DVAPs) are community-based treatment programs designed to address the needs of people who use violence in their intimate partner relationships. DVAPs acknowledge that abusive partners are, in most cases, capable of change and seek to modify behaviors and develop skills to prevent future abuse.

Vermont has 12 community-based DVAPs that offer in-depth group programming. Most participants are court-ordered to attend as a condition of a criminal court sentence. Last year, 85% of participants were referred to programming as a condition of their probation by the Department of Corrections. An additional 11% were referred by the Department for Children and Families as a component of a case plan and 3% of participants were self-referred.

DVAPs are required by statute to be certified by the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence. Every two years, DVAPs undergo a rigorous certification process which evaluates alignment with statewide standards. It includes a document and policy review and an evaluation by an interdisciplinary community review team, including law enforcement, domestic violence

service providers, Department of Corrections, Department for Children and Families, and State's Attorneys.

While DVAPs are not the sole vehicle for holding abusive partners accountable or changing behavior, they are a critical component to our response to domestic violence and can improve outcomes for both survivors and people who use violence. Investing in DVAP programming was one of the primary recommendations of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) in Vermont in 2020. The JRI recommendations highlighted the important role that domestic violence treatment has in promoting desistance.

Impact of H.222

A large number of survivors pursue civil protection orders and no parallel criminal process. There are many reasons survivors may not report to law enforcement, like the emotionally or financially taxing nature of a criminal case.

Currently, there is a significant gap in the referral pathway to DVAP in civil cases. It is unlikely a survivor's current or former partner will be referred to DVAP without a criminal process, even if it is what the survivor wants.

In 2023, the courts granted approximately 1,000 final RFAs, but only 400-500 people enroll in DVAP each year. With new programs coming online in 2025, DVAPs will have the capacity to provide this valuable treatment to more people.

Many survivors report that DVAP programming to change behavior would be extremely helpful as part of a civil protection order. Survivors may want to reduce risk of violence for their shared children, a future partner, or themselves if they want to maintain the relationship.

Earlier access to DVAP programming can help reduce risk of violence, before abusive behavior escalates. H.222 would expand options for survivors and the courts, and support people who cause harm in accessing services to change their behavior, leading to a better and safer life for themselves and others.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Heather and I would be happy to answer any questions.