

Vermont Council on Domestic Violence

To: Chair Lalonde and Members of the House Committee on Judiciary
From: Heather Holter, Co-Director, Vermont Council on Domestic Violence
Re: H.27 - Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission
Date: January 22, 2025

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify in support of legislation that would enable the Vermont Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission (Commission) to:

- review near-fatal instances of domestic violence,
- add new members to the Commission,
- and direct those who make appointments to consider diversity when appointing Commission members.

The Vermont Council on Domestic Violence

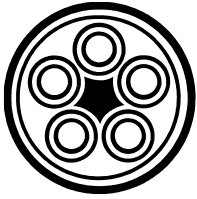
The Vermont Council on Domestic Violence (Council) was created in 15 V.S.A. § 1171. It includes broad representation from state and community stakeholders, in order to coordinate statewide responses to domestic violence. The Council makes recommendations for changes in state programs, laws, administrative regulations, policies, and budgets related to domestic violence. The Council collaborates with the Commission to develop strategies for implementing the Commission's recommendations.

Examine the trends and patterns of near-fatal instances of domestic violence in Vermont

I have been a member of the Vermont Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission since 2007. During that time, we have benefited from the willingness and bravery of many people who have shared intimate details about the abuse they witnessed.

The Commission regularly has opportunities to hear from surviving family members, children, and friends of people who lost their lives to a domestic violence-related homicide. We often interview people in professional capacities such as advocates, law enforcement, state employees, and health care professionals. These interviews provide a rare and critically important window into the effectiveness of risk assessment and safety planning as well as necessary resource development and systems changes.

On a couple of occasions over the years I have been able to take part in conversations with individuals who survived failed homicide attempts. Those survivors were able to recount details about the actions leading up to the homicide attempt that no one else could see or understand. Being able to hear from direct survivors of a near-fatal incident would offer significant value to the Commission and Vermont communities. As with completed homicides, near-fatal incidents represent a serious failure of our systems of response and require attention through a process like the Commission's.



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Commissions in 8 states in the nation review both near-fatal and fatal incidents of domestic violence, recognizing the importance of this victim and survivor-centered information and its ability to prevent future harm. I hope Vermont will take this step.

Add new members of the Commission

In reviewing cases of domestic violence homicide, the Commission is often struck by understanding that survivors and family members were unaware of resources that may have been available to them. Each of the proposed additional members works closely with survivors and people who cause harm. Increased membership from a restorative justice practitioner and victim advocates in each part of our criminal legal system will inform the Commission's careful consideration of how the needs of survivors can be met more effectively in Vermont, to prevent domestic violence-related homicide. Additionally, Vermont's Sheriffs are very often the law enforcement members who serve Relief from Abuse Orders, so the experience and perspective of a Sheriff representative will provide an important addition to the perspectives from law enforcement on the Commission.

Direct those who make appointments to consider diversity when appointing Commission members

Domestic violence homicide occurs in all communities, however, the impact on people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ people can be compounded by bias or barriers to access resources. The Commission depends upon building relationships with survivors of the most horrific experiences, and as we interact with survivors who reflect the diversity of Vermont, we will greatly benefit from having our Commission membership reflect that diversity.