

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FATALITY REVIEW COMMISSION 2024 Report

Statistical Report,  
Recommendations, and Trends

Office of the Attorney General and Council on Domestic Violence  
Issued: January 21, 2025

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# Introduction

All the Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission's (the Commission) past reports, including this report, are publicly available on the Attorney General's Office's website:

<https://ago.vermont.gov/reports/>.

This report contains 2023 statistical data and recommendations and trends that the Commission has discussed over the past year.

# Acknowledgment

The Commission wishes to thank Grace Yu, Public Health Analyst for the Vermont Department of Health, for providing us with statistical analysis and charts for this report. The Commission is grateful to the Health Department for their partnership!

# Background

The Vermont Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission was created by statute in 2002. The purpose of the Commission is to collect data and conduct in-depth reviews of domestic violence-related fatalities to better understand how the fatalities occurred and what can be done to prevent them.

Under [15 V.S.A. § 1140](#), the Commission was established with the following purposes:

- (1) to examine the trends and patterns of domestic violence-related fatalities in Vermont;
- (2) to identify barriers to safety, the strengths and weaknesses in communities, and systemic responses to domestic violence;
- (3) to educate the public, service providers, and policymakers about domestic violence fatalities and strategies for intervention and prevention; and
- (4) to recommend policies, practices, and services that will encourage collaboration and reduce fatalities due to domestic violence.

Commission proceedings and meetings are confidential by statute. The Commission reports its findings and recommendations to the Governor, the General Assembly, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence.

The recommendations in this report are based on case reviews conducted by the Commission and analysis of the related data. The Commission reviews Vermont Department of Health data provided by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) and law enforcement records for all homicides and select fatalities to determine if they are domestic violence-related. Of these, the Commission selects a few cases to review in depth. The Commission draws conclusions from these reviews and makes recommendations like those contained in this report.

## List of Commission Members

Section 1140(b) of Title 15 Vermont Statutes Annotated states that the Commission shall be established within the Office of the Attorney General, in consultation with the Council on Domestic Violence, and shall have 17 members appointed from agencies specified in the statute. Two members of the Commission, State’s Attorney Tracy Shriver and Major Dan Trudeau, retired during 2024. The Commission wishes to thank Tracy and Dan for their many years of service to the Commission and to the state of Vermont.

The 2024 members:

| Name                    | Position   | Organization   |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Dr. Tania Bertsch       | Physician  | UVMMC (Retired)  |
| Kate Brayton            | Victim Services Director                               | Vermont State Police (alternate)                       |
| Shawn Burke             | Chief  | South Burlington Police Dept.                          |
| Melissa Deas            | Representative   | Coalition of Domestic Violence Accountability Programs |
| Jennifer Firpo          | Law Enforcement Certification and Training Coordinator | Vermont Police Academy                                 |
| Emily Fredette          | Injury and Violence Prevention Program Manager         | Vermont Department of Health                           |
| Carolyn Hanson          | Assistant Attorney General                             | Office of the Attorney General                         |
| Susan Hardin            | Survivor   |  |
| Heather Holter          | Co-Director  | Vermont Council on Domestic Violence                   |
| Kerrie Johnson          | Public Defender  | Office of the Defender General                         |
| Dr. Kelley Klein        | Medical Director                                       | Department of Mental Health                            |
| Gary Marvel             | Deputy Director of Field Services                      | Department of Corrections                              |
| Dr. Kathleen McCubbin   | Deputy Medical Examiner                                | Office of the Chief Medical Examiner                   |
| Dr. Mariah McNamara     | Physician  | UVMMC Emergency Dept. (alternate)                      |
| Meredith Pelkey         | Director of Victim Services                            | Vermont Department of Corrections (alternate)          |
| Sarah Robinson          | Deputy Director  | Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence   |
| Julie Ryley             | Domestic Violence Unit Director                        | Vermont Department for Children and Families           |
| Hon. Kirstin Schoonover | Superior Court Judge                                   | Vermont Judiciary                                      |
| Tracy Shriver (retired) | State’s Attorney                                       | Windham County, Vermont                                |
| Dan Trudeau (retired)   | Major  | Vermont State Police                                   |

## What is the Commission's definition of a domestic violence-related fatality?

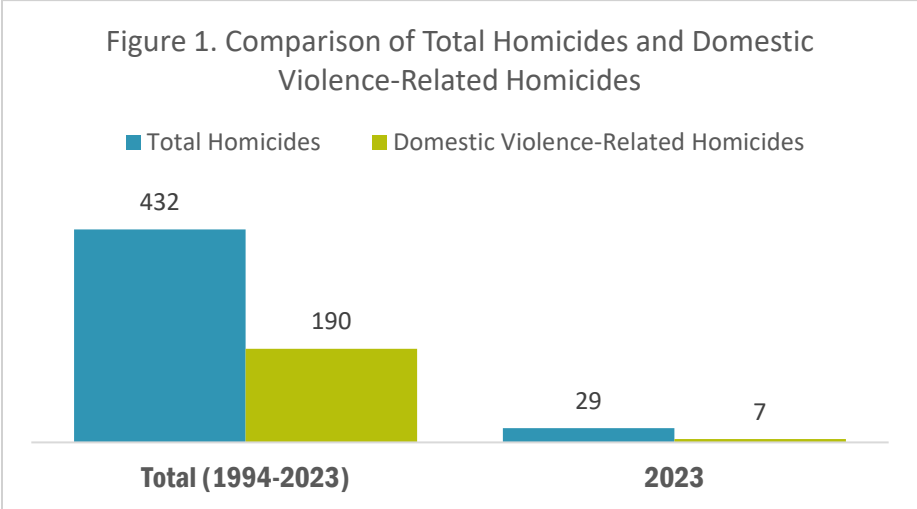
The data on domestic violence homicides on which the Commission reports includes only those cases that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has ruled as a homicide. It does not include suicides and other deaths that may be related to a domestic violence incident. However, the Commission is empowered to review in-depth any domestic violence-related fatality, and the Commission uses the following criteria to make that determination:

- the responsible party was related to the victim as a “family member” according to the “plain and commonly accepted meaning” of the term;
- the responsible party and the victim were related as “household members” as defined under the Abuse Prevention Act at [15 V.S.A. § 1101\(2\)](#);
- the responsible party killed an estranged partner’s current “household member;”
- the responsible party killed a current partner’s estranged “household member;”
- the responsible party killed a family member’s current or estranged “household member;”
- the responsible party killed a bystander(s) while attempting to harm family or “household members;”
- the responsible party is a law enforcement officer forced to kill in the line of duty when responding to a domestic violence incident;
- a law enforcement officer is killed in the line of duty when responding to a domestic violence incident;
- the fatality is domestic violence-related but is ruled a justifiable homicide;
- the fatality is a murder-suicide matter involving family or household members;
- the fatality is a suicide with a documented history of domestic violence to include victim suicide, responsible party suicide as a violent act in front of family or household members, responsible party suicide by law enforcement, and teen suicide; and
- the fatality is a substance use-related death (chronic use, suicide, overdose) that is related to domestic violence.

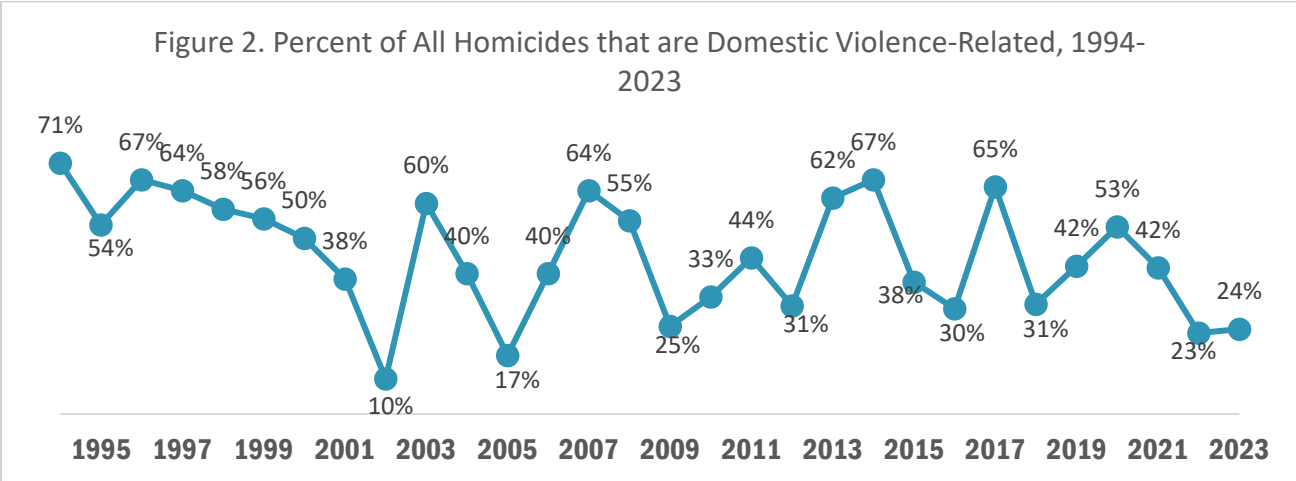
# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE DATA

According to Vital Statistics, there were 30 homicide deaths in Vermont in 2023. Other than medical transport to and dying in a Vermont hospital, one homicide had no other connection to the state, and thus was not reviewed by the Commission. Of the remaining 29 homicide deaths, 20 involved a firearm (69%). The Commission reviewed these 29 homicides and determined that seven were related to domestic violence (Figure 1). Five of those seven domestic violence-related homicides involved a firearm (71%). For the definition that the Commission uses to determine if a homicide is domestic violence-related, please see the [previous section](#) on “What is the Commission’s definition of a domestic violence-related fatality?”

Just fewer than half of all homicides in Vermont between 1994 and 2023 have been related to domestic violence. There have been a total of 432 homicides in Vermont since 1994 (Figure 1). Of those, 190 were determined to be domestic violence-related (44%).

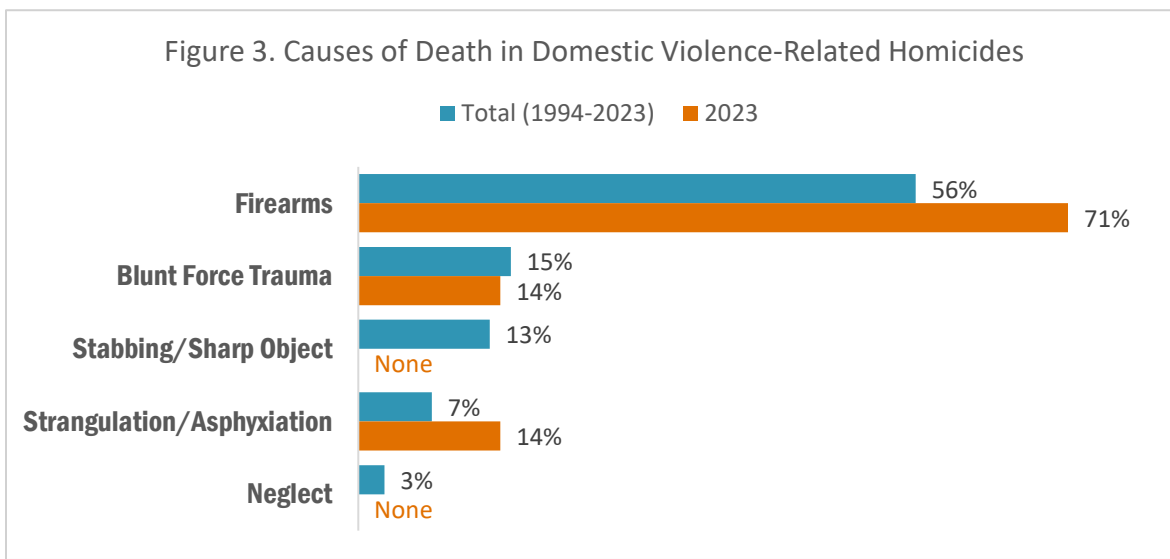


Over time, the percentage of homicides that are domestic violence-related has varied from a high of 71% in 1994 to a low of 10% in 2002 (Figure 2). In 2023, 24% of all homicides were determined to be domestic violence-related, similar to the rate in the previous year.



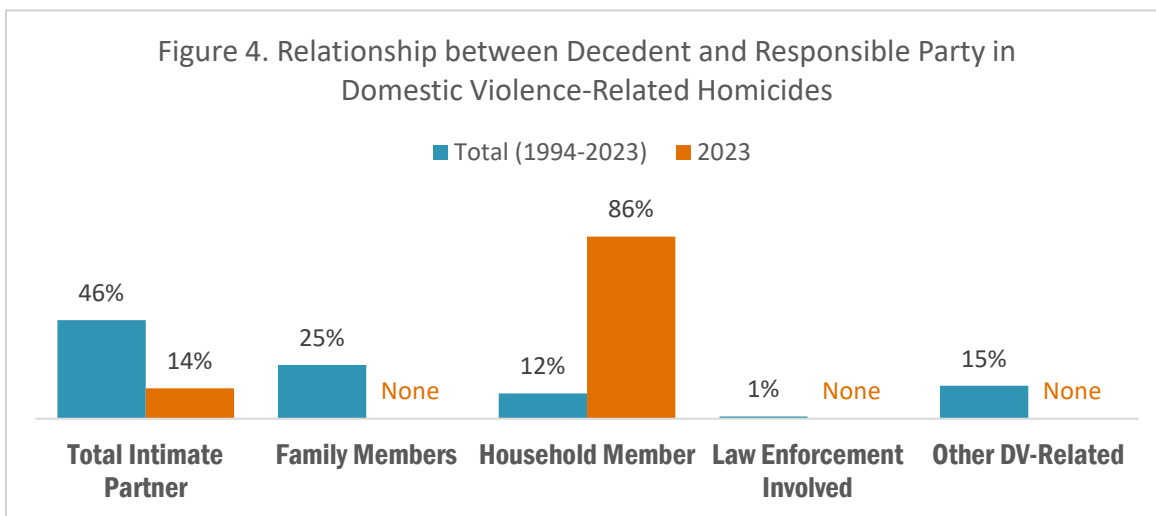
### Causes of Death

Of the seven domestic violence-related homicides in 2023, five involved death by firearm (71%, Figure 3), one involved strangulation (14%), and one involved blunt force trauma (14%). Since 1994, firearm injury has been the leading cause of domestic violence-related homicides, attributed to more than half of such incidents (56%, Figure 3). The next leading causes have been blunt force trauma (15%), stabbing (13%), strangulation (7%), and neglect (3%). Other causes of death have occurred in one percent or fewer of domestic violence-related homicides since 1994.

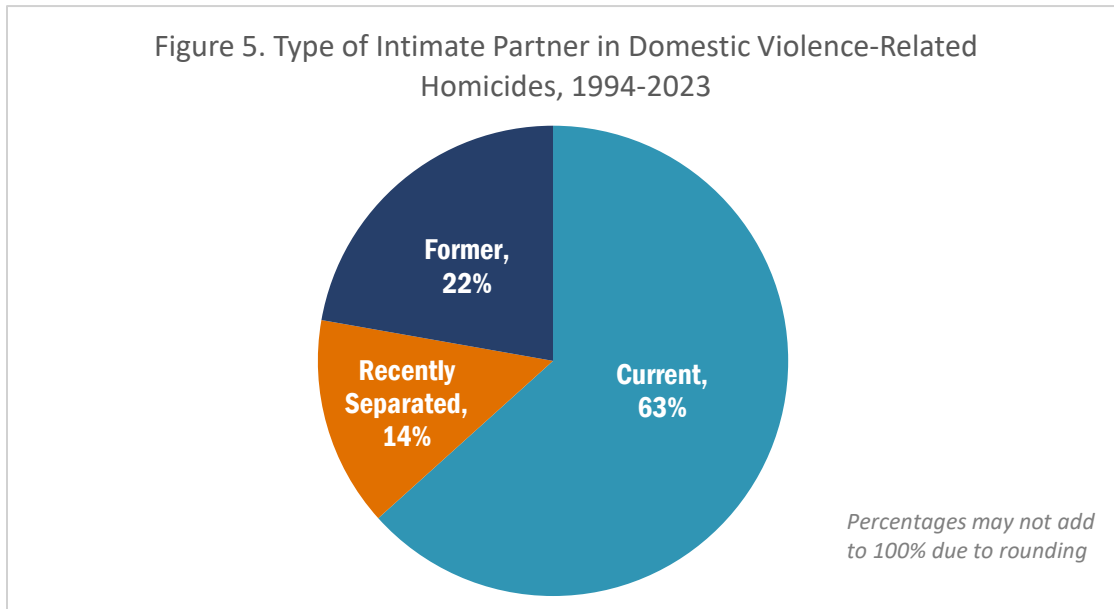


### Relationship Between Decedent and Responsible Party

In 2023, six domestic violence-related homicides involved household members (86%, Figure 4) and one involved a recently-separated intimate partner. Since 1994, almost half of all domestic violence-related homicides involved intimate partner relationships (46%, Figure 4), whether it was a current, recently separated, or former intimate partner. One-fourth of cases involved family members (25%), while nearly one in eight involved household members (12%).



In 2023, a recently-separated intimate partner was the responsible party in the one intimate partner-related domestic violence homicide. Since 1994, almost two-thirds of intimate partner responsible parties have been current partners (63%, Figure 5). Nearly one-quarter have been former intimate partners (22%), and around one in seven have been recently-separated intimate partners (14%).



### Background of Decedents

For 2023 domestic violence-related homicides, decedents ranged in age from 37 to 79 years old (Table 1). Since approximately 2013<sup>1</sup>, decedent ages have ranged from one month to 93 years. In 2023, four of the decedents were male and three were female. Similarly, since 1994, there has been an almost equal proportion of male and female decedents (49% and 51%, respectively). In 2023, all seven decedents were White and non-Hispanic. Since 2017<sup>2</sup>, 44 decedents were White and non-Hispanic (88%); four were Black (8%); one Asian (2%); and one Hispanic (2%).

### Background of Responsible Parties<sup>3</sup>

In 2023, six parties were responsible for the seven domestic violence-related homicides; the ages of the responsible parties ranged from 22 to 55 years old (Table 1). Since 2018<sup>4</sup>, ages have ranged from 23 to 71 years. In 2023, all responsible parties were male. Since 1994, around four in five responsible parties have been male (81%), while almost one in five were female (19%). In 2023, five responsible parties were White and one was Black. Since 2017<sup>4</sup>, 42 responsible parties were White and non-Hispanic (86%); six were Black (12%); and one was Asian (2%).

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<sup>1</sup> Age ranges for decedents have been collected since 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Race for decedents and responsible party has only been collected since 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Demographics have not been included for cases where law enforcement is the responsible party. In situations where a responsible party is responsible for more than one domestic violence homicide, they are captured in the data only once.

<sup>4</sup> Age ranges for responsible parties have been collected since 2018.

|                       | Decedent Demographics |               | Responsible Party Demographics |               |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
|                       | Total (** - 2023)     | 2023          | Total (** - 2023)              | 2023          |
| <b>Age Range</b>      | 1 month - 93 years    | 37 - 79 years | 23 - 71 years                  | 22 - 55 years |
| <b>Gender</b>         |                       |               |                                |               |
| Male                  | 94                    | 4             | 150                            | 6             |
| Female                | 96                    | 3             | 35                             | 0             |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b> |                       |               |                                |               |
| White                 | 44                    | 7             | 42                             | 5             |
| Black                 | 4                     | 0             | 6                              | 1             |
| Asian                 | 1                     | 0             | 1                              | 0             |
| Hispanic              | 1                     | 0             | 0                              | 0             |

Table 1. Comparison of demographics for decedents and responsible party.

*\*\*Some demographics have not been consistently collected over the years. Age range: collected since 2013 and 2018 for decedents and responsible parties, respectively. Gender: collected since 1994 for both groups. Race/ethnicity: collected since 2017 for both groups.*

*Demographics have not been included for cases where law enforcement is the responsible party. In situations where a responsible party is responsible for more than one domestic violence homicide, they are captured in the data only once.*

#### Counties/Location

In 2023, there were three domestic violence-related homicides in Windham County, two in Caledonia, one in Chittenden, and one in Franklin (Table 2). Since 1994, Chittenden and Rutland counties have had the highest proportions for occurrence of domestic violence-related homicides (17% and 16%, respectively).

| Vermont County | Population, 2023 <sup>†</sup> | Population (%), 2023 | Percent of Total Domestic Violence Homicides, 1994-2023 | Number of Domestic Violence Homicides, 2023 |
|----------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|---|---|
| Addison        | 37,720                        | 6%                   | 6%  | 0   |
| Bennington     | 37,183                        | 6%                   | 5%  | 0   |
| Caledonia      | 30,610                        | 5%                   | 8%  | 2   |
| Chittenden     | 169,481                       | 26%                  | 17%   | 1   |
| Essex          | 6,010                         | 1%                   | 3%  | 0   |
| Franklin       | 50,994                        | 8%                   | 5%  | 1   |
| Grand Isle     | 7,467                         | 1%                   | 2%  | 0   |
| Lamoille       | 26,060                        | 4%                   | 5%  | 0   |
| Orange         | 29,943                        | 5%                   | 6%  | 0   |
| Orleans        | 27,516                        | 4%                   | 6%  | 0   |
| Rutland        | 60,271                        | 9%                   | 16%   | 0   |
| Washington     | 60,142                        | 9%                   | 8%  | 0   |
| Windham        | 45,966                        | 7%                   | 7%  | 3   |
| Windsor        | 58,101                        | 9%                   | 9%  | 0   |

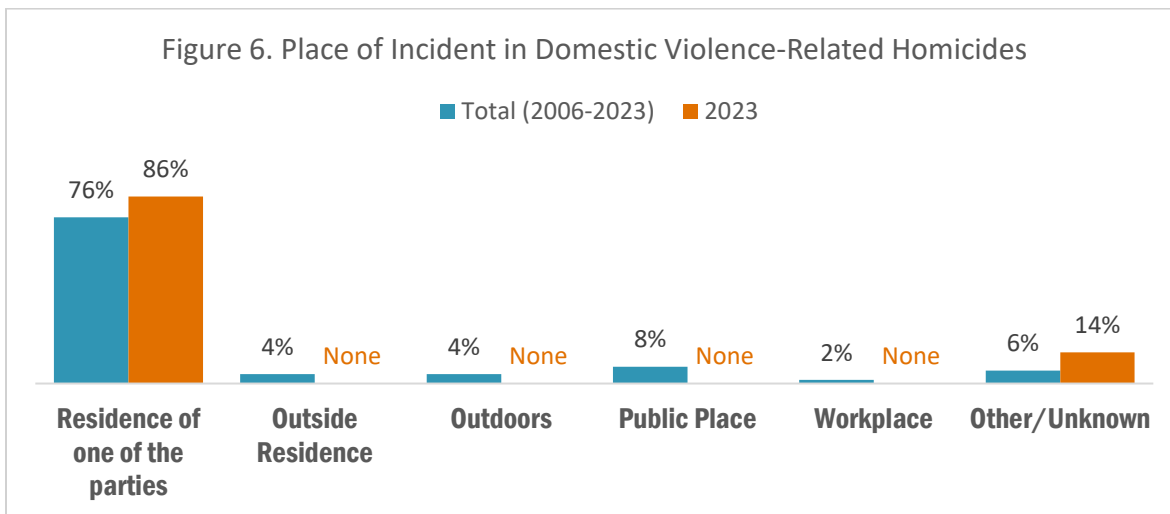
Table 2. Domestic violence-related homicides by Vermont county.

<sup>†</sup>County population estimates as of July 1, 2023. Retrieved from Vermont Vital Statistics:

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/stats/vital-records-population-data/vermont-population-estimates>



In 2023, six of the seven domestic violence-related homicides occurred at the residence of the decedent and/or responsible party (86%, Figure 6); one homicide occurred elsewhere. Since 2006<sup>5</sup>, around three-quarters of domestic violence-related homicides have occurred at a party’s residence (76%); just less than one in ten occurred in a public place (8%). Domestic violence-related homicides occurring at an outside residence (i.e., not the decedent or responsible party’s residence) or outdoors each account for 4% of locations over the years. Since 2006, there have been seven cases (6%) where location of incident does not fall under one of the established categories, including when the location is unknown. Very few domestic violence-related homicides have occurred at a workplace (2%).



### Child Witnessing

In 2023, there was one domestic violence-related homicide where a child was present or witnessed the incident. Since 1994, at least 39 domestic violence-related homicides have involved children being present at the scene.<sup>6</sup> In 2023, 1,537 children were served by the fifteen member organizations of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.<sup>7</sup> Children are among the most vulnerable as victims and witnesses to domestic and sexual violence, and are at higher risk for suicide, substance misuse, and becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence.<sup>8</sup>

### Alcohol/Substance Involvement

Alcohol or other substances, such as illicit drugs, prescription drugs, or cannabis, were involved in five of the seven domestic violence-related homicides in 2023. Alcohol or other substances are considered involved if either the decedent or responsible party are found with these substances in their system through toxicology testing at the time of autopsy. Since this data started being tracked in 2017, alcohol or other substances have been involved in 24 of the 50 (48%) domestic violence-related homicides.

<sup>5</sup> Place of incident has been recorded since approximately 2006.

<sup>6</sup> It is unclear from the data if children present has been collected consistently since 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Vermont Network. 2023 Data Snapshot. [VTN Data Snapshot 2023 Pg1 ML \(vtnetwork.org\)](https://vtnetwork.org/vtn-data-snapshot-2023-pg1-ml)

<sup>8</sup> Wolfe, D.A., Wekerle, C., Reitzel, D. and Gough, R. (1995). “Strategies to Address Violence in the Lives of High-Risk Youth.” In *Ending the Cycle of Violence: Community Responses to Children of Battered Women*, New York, NY: Sage Publications.

**Murder-Suicide**

Two separate domestic violence-related homicides involved murder-suicide in 2023 (29%). Since 1994, there have been 38 domestic violence-related murder-suicides and an additional three incidents involving domestic violence-related murder and attempted suicide. Since 1994, there have been an additional 14 suicides that were related to domestic violence. There was no evidence of suicides directly related to domestic violence occurring in 2023, apart from the two murder-suicides.

**Relief From Abuse Orders**

There was no current Relief from Abuse order (RFA) nor Relief from Abuse order on Behalf of a Minor (RFAOBO) in effect for any domestic violence-related homicides in 2023. Since 1994, the data show that among domestic violence-related homicides, current RFAs were in effect for six incidents (3%), and former RFAs between the parties involved existed in two incidents (1.5%).

Overall, in 2023, there were 3,078 petitions filed for RFAs and 415 petitions filed for RFAOBOs in Vermont. A total of 3,203 temporary orders (3,047 RFAs and 156 RFAOBOs) and 1,055 final orders (1,003 RFAs and 52 RFAOBOs) were granted.

| Vermont County | RFAs            |                           |                       | RFAOBOs         |                           |                       |
|----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
|                | Petitions Filed | Temporary Orders Granted* | Final Orders Granted† | Petitions Filed | Temporary Orders Granted* | Final Orders Granted† |
| Addison        | 121             | 118 (98%)                 | 42 (36%)              | 21              | 11 (52%)                  | 4 (36%)               |
| Bennington     | 250             | 195 (78%)                 | 64 (33%)              | 32              | 17 (53%)                  | 2 (12%)               |
| Caledonia      | 182             | 243 (134%)                | 77 (32%)              | 27              | 12 (44%)                  | 6 (50%)               |
| Chittenden     | 645             | 804 (125%)                | 245 (30%)             | 56              | 27 (48%)                  | 10 (37%)              |
| Essex          | 43              | 59 (137%)                 | 19 (32%)              | 3               | 2 (67%)                   | 0 (0%)                |
| Franklin       | 277             | 244 (88%)                 | 73 (30%)              | 43              | 18 (42%)                  | 6 (33%)               |
| Grand Isle     | 41              | 40 (98%)                  | 11 (28%)              | 3               | 1 (33%)                   | 1 (100%)              |
| Lamoille       | 121             | 107 (88%)                 | 47 (44%)              | 12              | 3 (25%)                   | 1 (33%)               |
| Orange         | 134             | 153 (114%)                | 57 (37%)              | 36              | 9 (25%)                   | 3 (33%)               |
| Orleans        | 165             | 206 (125%)                | 60 (29%)              | 34              | 12 (35%)                  | 4 (33%)               |
| Rutland        | 398             | 290 (73%)                 | 86 (30%)              | 43              | 10 (23%)                  | 1 (10%)               |
| Washington     | 280             | 251 (90%)                 | 89 (35%)              | 44              | 17 (39%)                  | 7 (41%)               |
| Windham        | 193             | 182 (94%)                 | 62 (34%)              | 25              | 10 (40%)                  | 3 (30%)               |
| Windsor        | 228             | 155 (68%)                 | 71 (46%)              | 36              | 7 (19%)                   | 4 (57%)               |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>3,078</b>    | <b>3,047</b>              | <b>1,003</b>          | <b>415</b>      | <b>156</b>                | <b>52</b>             |

Table 3. Relief from Abuse orders (RFAs) and Relief from Abuse orders Filed on Behalf of a Minor (RFAOBOs) filed and granted for 2023 by Vermont county.

\*Percentages reflect temporary orders granted of the total filed. Because multiple temporary orders may be granted based on a single petition (e.g., extending a temporary order), these percentages can exceed 100%.

†Percentages reflect final orders granted of the total temporary orders granted.

Note: This data includes all temporary or final orders issued within the responsive time period. It may not reflect orders for the petitions that were filed during the same time period. Each order is counted separately within these totals.

### Firearms Information

New this year, the Commission received data about firearms and domestic violence from the Vermont Intelligence Center as part of their Gun Violence Project. The first table (below) captures the number of reported gun violence incidents in 2023 and, of those, how many were related to domestic violence.

| 2023 Firearm Incidents <sup>9</sup> |  |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Total Incidents of Gun Violence     | Total Incidents of Gun Violence Related to Domestic Violence | Percentage of Total Related to Domestic Violence |
| 424                                 | 58   | 14%  |

The Second table (below) captures how many times a gun purchase from a licensed firearms dealer in Vermont was attempted by a prohibited person and denied using the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) and the number of those in which the denial was based on the attempted purchaser having either a criminal conviction for misdemeanor domestic violence or an active RFA order.

| 2023 Vermont NICS Denials |  |  |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Total Denials             | Total Denials Related to Domestic Violence | Percentage of Total Related to Domestic Violence |
| 158                       | 4  | 2.5%   |

## Recommendations

The Commission makes recommendations to the Governor, General Assembly, Chief Justice, and Council on Domestic Violence based on information gathered during the case review process. Our focus is to find common threads and base our recommendations on those. Occasionally, we do make recommendations based on a single case review. At the end of the calendar year, the Commission had not finished its current case review and may have additional recommendations to offer after the review process concludes.

### **1. Lethality Assessment**

The Commission has offered its support for use of a statewide lethality assessment (LAP) tool in its past two reports. In last year's report, we noted that Vermont State Police were committed to having all troopers use LAP in every domestic violence case. Some local law enforcement agencies are using a LAP tool, but not all. It is critical that the state find a way to resource and support law enforcement to do this vital work in partnership with advocates. Use of a LAP tool will help build a

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<sup>9</sup> This data is derived from the Vermont Intelligence Center's (VIC) Gun Violence Project. The VIC monitors Vermont law enforcement's primary Records Management System (RMS), Valcour, using established criteria to collect data on gun violence within the State of Vermont. At the time of this report, we do not have the ability to review the state's other RMS system for the following agencies: Norwich Police Department, Windsor Police Department, and Hartford Police Department. Analysts classify qualifying reports into the following categories: cases in which a firearm is used to wound another person are classified as "Gunshot Wounds Reported;" cases in which a firearm is fired with no reported injuries are classified as "Witnessed Gunfire Incident;" and incidents in which a firearm is present to illicit fear are classified as "Threat with a Firearm." Based on the timing of this report, there may be investigations and cases that are incomplete and excluded; data is provisional and is subject to change. The project methodology relies on observational documentation; discrepancies may exist, and the data should not be considered comprehensive.

larger picture of the violence that has occurred, rather than focusing on the single incident. It will also help to determine if there are firearms present that may or may not have been involved in the incident but which may impact safety. As noted in the data section of our report, five of the seven domestic violence-related homicides in 2023 involved a firearm. Research has shown that the presence of a firearm in a home where there is domestic violence significantly increases the risk of lethality. According to Center for Gun Violence Solutions at Johns Hopkins, “Nearly half of all women murdered in the United States are killed by a current or former intimate partner, and more than half of these intimate partner homicides are by firearm.” <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/solutions/domestic-violence-and-firearms>.

It is also important to note that LAP tools can be very valuable in health care and other settings. In recent cases, the Commission has noted that while there may not have been prior law enforcement involvement in the domestic violence, there were health care providers who were seeing the victim for domestic violence-related injury. The Commission hopes that this model will be expanded to include other first responders in addition to law enforcement officers in order to reach more victims of domestic violence.

**Recommendations:**

- That the Legislature provide appropriate resources and funding necessary for training and ongoing support for statewide use of a lethality assessment (LAP) tool as part of law enforcement response to every domestic violence incident.
- That the Vermont Criminal Justice Council (Council) determine which LAP tool will best meet the needs of law enforcement and develop a protocol for its use that must be adopted by all law enforcement agencies.
- That the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence assist the Council and local law enforcement agencies in identifying an effective LAP tool and identifying community advocacy organizations in each county that are willing to provide advocacy services when conducting a lethality assessment.

**2. Address Access to Firearms**

In nearly every domestic violence homicide that the Commission reviews, there is a missed opportunity to address the responsible party’s access to firearms. Firearm injury has been the leading cause of domestic violence homicide in Vermont. It may not always be possible to limit access to firearms, but we need to do more to create opportunities where this is possible both voluntarily, and when legally permitted to do so, involuntarily. In case reviews, the Commission has noted that the responsible party often threatened to take their own life if the relationship were to dissolve. Commonly, the responsible party’s friends and/or family are aware that they have firearms. Often the victim and/or family members are not concerned about harm to themselves but will frequently say that the responsible party made threats of self-harm.

We need to do more to identify these threats as potentially leading to both incidents of self-harm and harm to others. We need to better educate the public about the broader risk and raise awareness about the availability of out-of-home storage options through federal firearms licensees (FFLs). These FFLs are, generally, local gun retailers. Many Vermont health care providers can provide counseling about lethal means and can assist families in finding an FFL that provides firearms storage. We need to encourage firearm sellers and owners to identify these situations and consider what steps they can take to prevent access to firearms by individuals who may pose a risk both to themselves and others. This risk can impact the whole community. National research

shows that there is a connection between domestic violence and mass shootings. “[I]n 68.2% of mass shootings from 2014-2019, the perpetrator either killed family or intimate partners or the shooter had a history of domestic violence.” <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/solutions/domestic-violence-and-firearms>

**Recommendations:**

- That the Legislature appoint a six-month study committee made up of law enforcement leaders, representatives from the Judiciary, DOC, family law practitioners, industry, advocates, and prosecutors to recommend legislative changes to enhance compliance with firearm surrender orders. The Committee should also work with Firearms Technical Assistance Program (FTAP) to examine existing law to determine what actions can be taken to ensure that those who are prohibited by law from possessing a firearm, either permanently or temporarily, comply with the surrender/non-possession orders.
- That in cases of self-harm, courts and law enforcement address access to firearms and that health care providers and other first responders screen for domestic violence history.
- That the Legislature provide funding to raise awareness in the community about the availability of FFLs to provide temporary storage of firearms.

**3. Victim Service Positions for Local Police Departments**

In last year’s report, the Commission explained the need for victim service positions to assist local police departments. This continues to be a very pressing need. In the last few cases that the Commission has reviewed, the victim or their family members did not receive the resources they needed following the homicide because the perpetrator took their own life, and thus there was no case to file and no prosecutor’s office victim-advocate assigned to the case. The Commission has reviewed several cases where survivors received no formal or on-going support in a murder/suicide.

There is also a potential gap that can occur in serious domestic assault cases that do not result in a murder/suicide. There may not be a prosecutor’s office-victim-advocate involved when the defendant is initially arrested. For example, if a defendant is detained on bail or held without bail **before** arraignment. If the advocate has not yet connected with the victim, the Victim Information Notification Every Day (VINE) Service, a free and confidential service that provides updates on an incarcerated individual’s movement among facilities or impending release, may not have any contact information entered for the victim. If that information is not yet entered, the victim will not be notified if the defendant is released. Law enforcement officers may have their hands full with the investigation and likewise be unable to assist. A victim service specialist who is housed in the local police department can make sure that the victim has timely notice before arraignment if a defendant is released and can provide safety planning and support.

To provide much-needed victim services to survivors and families, the Commission strongly recommends the creation of two new victim services positions. To be most effective, the positions should be based in a statewide entity and housed within a local law enforcement agency. The positions should focus solely on victim needs.

**Recommendation:**

- That the Legislature fund two new regional victim service positions that work with municipal agencies to ensure immediate and ongoing victim support in every domestic violence homicide/near homicide and murder/suicide.

**4. Ensuring confidential advocacy for college students experiencing dating violence**

Vermont colleges have systems to ensure that they assess threats of self-harm and harm to others on their campuses. Many have campus police who participate in these assessments. They have extensive training and support for Title IX compliance. Many have resources for students who experience sexual harm. The Commission believes these institutions should provide more confidential resources that offer support and prevention strategies for students who experience dating or intimate partner violence. The Commission has noted in recent cases that a decedent experienced domestic violence or the responsible party engaged in domestic violence while enrolled in an institution of higher learning.

Vermont has an Intercollegiate Sexual Harm Prevention Council that encompasses dating violence, although the name itself does not make this self-evident. These programs are an outgrowth of Title IX and reflect its focus on sexual violence. This emphasis carries through to the programs. For example, at the University of Vermont, confidential resources are contracted out to HopeWorks, the local Network program that addresses sexual violence in Chittenden County. The Commission believes it would be helpful for colleges to ensure that all students are aware of and, for those experiencing physical violence, to be connected directly to an organization that works with survivors of domestic violence. We need to be sure that students receive information about the confidential community resources that can help them. They should have access to community-based resources that can provide information about stalking or relief from abuse (RFA) orders in addition to campus resources. It should be clear to the campus community that there are resources available for dating violence that does not necessarily involve sexual violence.

**Recommendations:**

- That the legislative charge of the Intercollegiate Sexual Harm Prevention Council be expanded to include enhancing the capacity for Vermont institutions of higher education to address dating violence.
- That the Intercollegiate Sexual Harm Prevention Council provide a model policy to all Vermont institutions of higher education to provide adequate and clear access to confidential, community-based resources for students experiencing physical violence or stalking and provide a copy of the policy to the Legislature by 2027.
- That the Intercollegiate Sexual Harm Prevention Council survey all Vermont colleges to determine which institutions offer comprehensive training for all students on dating violence, stalking prevention, and healthy relationships by 2026.

**5. Option to Impose Accountability Programming in a Final Order**

Courts have broad authority under [15 V.S.A. §1103](#) to issue “orders ... it deems necessary to protect the plaintiff or the children.” However, imposing a requirement that a respondent engage in domestic violence accountability programming is not explicitly listed as a form of relief. It has not been a practice of the Judiciary to impose programming as part of a civil order, perhaps because programming in the past generally required an admission of facts that might be part of a pending criminal proceeding. That requirement is no longer the case. Many survivors report that

programming to help their partner change behavior would be extremely helpful as part of the order to help prevent further abuse. The Commission agrees that programming at an earlier stage, rather than imposed only after a criminal conviction, could potentially lessen the likelihood of further abuse.

**Recommendation:**

- That the Legislature amend 15 V.S.A §1103 to give courts explicit authority to impose a condition that a respondent engage in domestic violence accountability programming when a final RFA is granted.

**6. Handling Sensitive Evidence Requests**

The Commission has heard testimony from survivors that they have encountered difficulty obtaining body camera footage/videos from police even if there is no ongoing criminal case. The state has a model policy ([link](#)) that governs the use, storage, and release of body-worn cameras. Survivors have expressed that reviewing these materials can sometimes aid in their healing process. It is essential that a survivor have an advocate to assist when this request is made. An advocate can preview the requested material and let the survivor know what to expect so they can make an informed decision about whether to view it. An advocate could also be present to view the materials with the survivor to support their decision about whether or how much to view.

**Recommendation:**

- That law enforcement agencies commit to following the state model policy and apply the guidance from that policy that allows access to materials requested by a survivor in a trauma-informed way with the assistance of an advocate, so long as the disclosure or access would not adversely impact any ongoing legal proceedings.

## Trends and Updates Impacting Domestic Violence

**Department of Corrections Pretrial Services Initiative**

The Commission is pleased that the Legislature has created a pretrial services unit in the Department of Corrections. The Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) Pretrial Supervision Program (PSP) is designed to monitor defendants awaiting trial, to support compliance with release conditions, attendance at court, and reducing recidivism. This program, authorized under [13 V.S.A. §7555](#), uses evidence-based practices to supervise eligible defendants.

Pretrial officers recommend eligibility for PSP based on criteria such as residency, lack of warrants or detainers, and the ability to participate in monitoring systems. Eligible defendants must have a violation of conditions of release or five or more pending dockets in criminal court. If a defendant is accepted for PSP, the pretrial officer will provide regular updates on compliance to the court every 90 days, allowing for potential adjustments in supervision level or removal from the program. If a defendant violates their conditions, the pretrial officer notifies the individual and the State's Attorney, and submits a sworn affidavit of the violation. A roll-out of the program is planned to begin in Orleans County in January 2025.

The Commission hopes that this program will increase safety for victims of domestic violence by promoting defendant's compliance with conditions of release, allow defendants to begin accountability programming earlier in the process, and bring violations of court conditions to the court's attention in a timely fashion. The Legislature should also consider what types of offenses should be prioritized for pretrial monitoring. Rather than basing it on the number of offenses, the

Commission believes the Legislature should consider whether violence is involved in the offense and prioritize domestic violence offenses which are often ongoing offenses and present a demonstrated risk to individuals.

### **Death Notification**

Police officers have long-established protocols for providing a death notification. Law enforcement make every effort to ensure that notifications are done in person in a timely manner. In some cases, that means asking another law enforcement agency that is located closest to the surviving family to provide the notification on behalf of the investigating agency. However, because many people now share information on social media in real time, it has become increasingly difficult for law enforcement to notify families before the family receives notification from other, informal sources. The Commission has heard from an officer that was forced to do notifications over the phone because of the information spreading on social media. There is pressure on law enforcement to make the notification happen quickly which can be difficult when there are multiple victims and/or multiple family members to notify. This is hard work and requires the officers to not only act as timely as possible but to do so in a trauma-informed way and have resources available.

The Commission believes that the new victim services positions for local law enforcement (see Recommendation #3, above) will provide critical help to law enforcement in performing this work in a trauma-informed manner. The rise in the use of social media has placed enormous pressure on departments with no easy solution to address it. Even when social media or press has prematurely identified victims, it is important for law enforcement to do a formal, in-person notification and for law enforcement to include victim service personnel if available.

### **Family support offered by OCME**

The Commission is pleased that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) now has a Support Services Specialist who contacts families whose loved one was examined at the OCME. The OCME investigates over 2,000 cases a year and performs autopsies or visual inspections on over 700 cases. The Support Services Specialist will be able to better support families by offering resources, answering questions about OCME processes, and providing information about the cause of death. They can provide a list of bereavement services, connect families with funeral homes/burial information, and in cases of suicide, can provide a packet of information and support services. They can also interview family members to collect data that is not normally collected in the field but is helpful for public health and prevention initiatives. The position is currently funded through three different grants through the Department of Health, and dedicated state funding would provide more stability for this position.

### **Confidential Help for Those Causing Harm**

As discussed in our report last year, the Commission is very pleased that confidential counselling services for those causing harm is being offered in Vermont. Based on a successful program called A Call for Change in Massachusetts, <https://acallforchangehelpline.org/>, the Network Program in the Northeast Kingdom, Umbrella, launched a warm line called The Spark, <https://www.thesparkvt.org/>, that connects callers with a trained support person to help if the caller is concerned that they may or have already caused harm to their partner. They are also available to talk with family members who want to help a loved one, professionals working with someone who has caused harm, or a community member, such as a high school or college student, who is concerned about safety in their or another's relationship. The warmline is free, confidential, and staffed from 10:00 AM to 10:00 PM seven days a week, every day of the year. They will also respond to emails or voicemails within 24 hours. This is part of a national movement to offer non-criminal responses that are restorative in nature for those who cause or may cause harm.



As part of a pilot project, each of the total 42 individuals who completed an initial program intake for Domestic Violence Accountability programming in the Northeast Kingdom in 2024 were encouraged to make use of The Spark as an ongoing resource in their accountability work.

The Spark has added three new responders who have completed 24 hours of training and attend bi-weekly supervision with the nation's leader in confidential, phone-based support for those who cause harm, A Call for Change. The Spark also hired a part-time Outreach Coordinator who is working with community partners throughout the Northeast Kingdom to increase referrals to the warmline, including the Department of Corrections, the Department for Children and Families, Kingdom Recovery, the opioid addiction treatment program BAART, and healthcare professionals.

### **Domestic Violence and Firearms Technical Assistance Project (FTAP)**

In 2019, Vermont was selected as one of the FTAP sites, and the only statewide site, to be part of a Violence Against Women Act grant to examine how to better address the intersection between domestic violence and firearms using existing law. FTAP began by making suggestions to the Judiciary's Family Division Oversight Committee for improvements to court forms used in the relief from abuse order process to better inform litigants about firearms relief and surrender and to provide better information to the court and law enforcement officers serving the paperwork about the defendant's possession of firearms. FTAP has also prepared materials and worked on website updates to provide general education to the public and litigants about the availability of firearms relief.

This year FTAP has continued to work on identifying ways to monitor compliance with firearms surrender when it is required by the Court and to make the general public aware of the types of firearms relief available.

### **Domestic Violence Accountability Programming**

There are 12 Domestic Violence Accountability Programs (DVAPs) around the state that are certified by the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence to be operating in alignment with statewide standards. <https://www.vtdvcouncil.org/dvap-standards> Information about the programs can be found on the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence's website: <https://www.vtdvcouncil.org/>

Vermont's DVAPs have successfully captured over one year of extensive, participant level data related to the group participants, and researchers from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln are engaged in studying that data to report their findings in 2025. Additionally, DVAPs continue to administer detailed pre- and post-participation surveys developed with research colleagues at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

Vermont's DVAPs provide programming options for people who have caused harm to an intimate partner and want to change the way they behave in their relationships. Programs offer participants the opportunity to examine the harm they have committed, take accountability for their behaviors, and learn new tools to use as they change how they interact in their intimate relationships. Programs use a variety of nationally recognized curricula, including the Duluth Model, Achieving Change through Values Based Behavior, Emerge, Circles of Peace, the trauma-informed Journey to Legacy curriculum, Parenting with Respect, and Caring Dads. A new program for youth and young adults, the Circles of Peace-Youth program has been launched this year.

As of October 1, 2022, Vermont eliminated all participant fees to reduce barriers and increase access to programming. Vermont's DVAP facilitators note that the elimination of participant fees

has removed barriers for people to start and maintain programming. Removing that financial barrier has expedited moving people successfully through programs and helped to move through the backlog of criminal case resolution following the COVID lockdown. Since many DVAP participants continue to live with their partners and/or to co-parent with survivors, this positively impacts the financial wellbeing of domestic violence survivors. Enrollment has been steadily increasing from 344 participants in FY22 to 416 in FY23 to 485 in FY24.

Individuals may complete programming to satisfy a condition of probation, parole or other court order, or be referred to programming by the Department for Children and Families. People may also self-refer to participate in these free programs. The Council on Domestic Violence is working with DVAP providers to develop LGBTQIA+ inclusive programming, as well as a culturally-specific statewide program for this population.

#### **National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) Denials Information**

Under the NICS Denial Notification Act of 2022, the FBI is required to notify local, state, and tribal law enforcement agencies when a prohibited person attempts to purchase a firearm from an FFL and is denied. The notification includes the reason for the denial: thus, it is now possible for Vermont law enforcement to easily identify if a person who has a criminal conviction for misdemeanor domestic violence or has an active RFA order has attempted to purchase firearms.

At present, there is no one who notifies the victim of record of the attempted firearms purchase. FBI notification goes only to the law enforcement agencies. The Vermont Intelligence Center (VIC) is tracking this information for Vermont. As noted in the statistical section of this report, there were only four attempted purchases in 2023, but given the high rate of lethality in domestic violence cases where firearms are involved, each of these incidents needs follow up investigation by Vermont law enforcement and a method to ensure victim notification of the attempt. This is an important tool available to law enforcement in combating domestic violence homicide, and Vermont should find a means to use this data to lessen risk to survivors.

# Resources

There are resources available for people experiencing domestic violence. The Vermont Network has a statewide hotline for domestic abuse that can be reached at 800-228-7395. The Network's fifteen member programs provide services to survivors in all fourteen counties in Vermont. For an interactive map to help you locate a local program near you, visit <https://vtnetwork.org/get-help/>.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline has a safety planning tip sheet that can be found here: <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/safety-planning-around-guns-and-firearms> or call 800- 799-SAFE (7233) to get help.

Vermont has Domestic Violence Accountability Programs for people who have caused harm to an intimate partner. These programs are certified by the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence and people do not have to be court ordered to participate—they can self-refer and participate in programming free of charge. <https://www.vtdvcouncil.org/find-a-dvap>.

If you or someone you know is concerned about causing harm to an intimate partner, there is free confidential help available 24/7 from The Spark, a violence prevention warmline at <https://www.thesparkvt.org/>.

For a list of firearm storage locations in Vermont, please visit <https://vsp.vermont.gov/firearmstorage#:~:text=The%20court%20can%20require%20the,the%20of%20firearms%20with%20a%20FFL>.

For a list of places in Vermont offering free gun locks please visit <https://www.justice.gov/usao-vt/gunsafe-vt>.