

**Women's
Justice Center**



**Centro de Justicia
Para Mujeres**

**250 Sebastopol Rd.
Santa Rosa, CA 95407
(707) 575-3150**

E mail: rdjustice@monitor.net

How to Investigate Domestic Violence Homicide

**A Guide for Investigating the Path Leading Up to Domestic Violence Homicides
— for Friends, Activists, Journalists, and All Who Care —**

*If I die, I don't want other women to suffer what I have suffered.
I want them to be listened to!*
— **Maria Teresa Macias,**
just weeks before being murdered by her husband

Index:

[Introduction](#)

[Domestic Violence Homicides are Preventible](#)

[Examples of Domestic Violence Homicide Investigations](#)

[Introduction to Your Investigation](#)

[Interviewing the Family and Friends of the Victim](#)

[Interviewing the Perprator's Family and Friends](#)

[Interviewing Law Enforcement and Others Authorities](#)

[Acquiring Documents and Records](#)

[Following the Homicide Case in Court](#)

[How to Write Up Your Investigation Findings](#)

[What to do With Your Investigation Findings](#)

Introduction

If you want to do something to stop the domestic violence homicides of women in your community, here's a powerful project you can carry out by yourself or with a couple of friends. No matter who you are or where in the world you live, you can and you should investigate the path leading up to domestic violence homicides of women in your area, for two very important reasons.

First, the story of these women's lives and deaths cannot be allowed to be summarily swept off the stage of human existence. After first being isolated, minimized, and eliminated by the abuser, the woman is then generally written off again in press stories about the murder in which she is portrayed as little more than a faceless victim interchangeable with any other. Reviving and telling her story is a matter of justice and of getting the community to face the significance of the loss.

The second compelling need for your investigation is that the woman's murder, like the murder of most domestic violence homicide victims, was probably completely preventable, if only officials had done their jobs. Too many women are murdered only because the police, prosecutors, and courts to whom she had earlier gone for help failed to respond properly or failed to respond at all.

In investigating homicide after homicide in our own and neighboring communities we have found that the women's murders were preceded by gross failures of criminal justice officials to deal properly with the women's earlier calls for help. Despite constant law enforcement rhetoric about how seriously they treat domestic violence, the realities were quite the opposite. The women had been treated with contempt, crucial evidence wasn't collected, men weren't arrested, reports weren't written, viable cases weren't prosecuted, victim's rights were violated, and agency policies and state laws were ignored. Investigating and exposing these official failures leading up to domestic violence homicides is one of the most powerful ways you can rally and mobilize your community to pressure for the changes necessary to save other women's lives and to stop these senseless killings.

Even if you've never done an investigation like this before, there's no reason you can't do a good job the first time around. Investigation is mostly common sense. We've seen a number of untrained family members and friends who have put together very good investigations on their own with virtually no help at all. Whether you're an advocate, a community activist, a friend of the victim, a journalist, or just someone who is determined that this violence against women must stop, consider the immense impact you can have with a project that requires no formal organizations, no budgets, and no rigid time line.

The following guide doesn't cover every situation you'll encounter in carrying out such an investigation, but it should give you some basic stepping stones. Don't be intimidated by the guide itself either. To do a good investigation you don't necessarily have to carry out every point covered here. Your own purposes and the circumstances will best shape the scope of what you need to do.

Naturally, you can also use this same guide to investigate the background of any violence against women case, whether or not the woman has been murdered, and with the obvious added benefit that the victim herself can fill in huge parts of the story. We focus here on domestic violence homicide in part because the woman can never again speak for herself. And also because murder is compelling enough to hold the public's attention.

Public consciousness has evolved. Though many people still don't pay much attention to the daily domestic violence around them, the needless murder of women is increasingly seen as unacceptable. Your investigation can galvanize the public's outrage and give them the facts they need to formulate effective demands for change.

There's one other thing we hope you'll do with this guide. Whether or not you plan to carry out your own investigation, please download this guide and give it to women's groups, students, and journalists in your area.

Domestic Violence Homicides are Preventible

This isn't a pipe dream, nor our dream, nor any dream at all. It's proven fact. Domestic violence homicide is preventible! There are a half dozen cities around the country, cities as diverse as San Diego, Nashville, TN, and Quincy, MA, that have been able to reduce their domestic violence homicide rates by more than 60% in just a matter of years.

The key to these dramatic reductions is the same in each local. Aggressive and thorough law enforcement response to domestic violence at the misdemeanor level is what saves women's lives.

And it stands to reason. Domestic violence homicide doesn't occur out of the blue like a robbery suddenly gone bad. Domestic violence is a violent regime that generally develops and escalates slowly over time. If law enforcement and other officials intervene adequately in the flare-ups that occur along the way, the violence is stopped. If on the other hand, officials fail to respond adequately, the victim is left in greater danger than before she made the call. The perpetrator is emboldened, the victim is exposed and weakened, and the violence escalates.

To be sure, all segments of society have a role in stopping violence against women- families, churches, schools, neighborhoods, businesses - everyone. But once there is violence or threat of violence, only law enforcement has the power, the authority, and the official responsibility to put the perpetrator under control. If law enforcement doesn't respond properly by protecting the victim and controlling the perpetrator, the help coming from others will only be undone by the perpetrator's continuing violence.

Tragically, at the same time that the criminal justice system holds the key to saving women's lives, it's a system that remains more stubbornly resistant to change than other segments of society. Though there are progressive individuals and units here and there, like those in the cities we've named above, the core culture of law enforcement remains rife with old and dangerous sexist attitudes, practices, and biases against women. It's going to take immense public pressure to bring about the deep seated changes needed to make the criminal justice system provide truly equal protection of the laws. And that's where you, your friends, and your investigation come in.

In rare cases, you may find that the victim never did contact authorities for help, in which case you'll want to know why so that issue can be addressed. Or you may find that officials did everything they could, and then your question becomes what else could have been done. But in most domestic violence homicides you'll find that the path leading up to her death was

paved with repeated and gross failures of law enforcement officials to do their jobs.

Examples of Domestic Violence Homicide Investigations

One of the best ways to get a better idea of the range of ways these investigations can be carried out and written up is to take look at some examples.

On the Women's Justice Center web site at www.justicewomen.com see the case of [Maria Teresa Macias](#) and the write up on the Jackie Anderson case in the criminal justice section under the title, "[Jackie's Life, A Courtroom Joke](#)".

On the Purple Beret's web site at www.purpleberets.org see the cases of Mina Arevalo, Claire Joyce Tempongko , the Pelfini case, and the case of Debbie Zuver.

In addition, both these web sites have much additional information that should be of help to you on general issues related to violence against women and on specific criminal justice aspects of these cases.

Introduction to Your Investigation

Your Investigative Team

Although you certainly can do this kind of an investigation on your own, most people prefer to work with others. Two or three people working together is ideal. With two or three people you can divide the work and at the same time keep the task of sharing information from becoming overwhelming.

The Order of Your Investigation

The order in which you carry out the tasks of your investigation, is sometimes very strategic and at other times can be left to your convenience. Clearly, the best order of doing things will be different in every investigation. The important thing to remember is to always stop and give some thought and planning to your next move before making it. Timing can be key to the amount of information you obtain.

Here are a couple of examples of the kind of the questions you'll want to consider in deciding the order in which you do things: Are there certain things you want to accomplish before tipping police and prosecutors that you're digging into their handling of the case? Do you want the family's prior approval or do you want to carry out the investigation whether or not the victim's family is involved? Are there certain documents you feel you should see before interviewing given individuals? Etc. Stop, think, and strategize before you act.

The Speed of Your Investigation

In one sense, there is no urgency to your investigation. The victim's life has already been lost. So you can be completely flexible about fitting this work into your life. On the other hand, the potential impact of your findings will decrease the longer you wait to present them. In the end, the speed of your investigation may also be dependant on a number of factors out of your control, not the least of which is the next question, the suicide/homicide question.

The Suicide/Homicide Question

About a third of all domestic violence homicides are followed quickly by the perpetrator committing suicide. When the perpetrator commits suicide, the police investigation into the deaths will generally be wrapped up in a matter of days or at most a week or two. At that point, the homicide investigation is said to be "closed", and most of the documents associated with the death, such as the coroner's report, the homicide investigation itself, and records associated with the case, generally become quickly available to you on the public record.

On the other hand, when the perpetrator does not commit suicide, the police homicide investigation is likely to remain "open" and many related documents will be unavailable to the public for a much longer period of time. Generally, these documents won't become available until they are presented to the court or until after sentencing of the perpetrator. This doesn't mean that you can't go forward with your own investigation during this time. But it does mean that it will be more difficult to get hold of certain documents and reports. Often, however, there are alternative means to obtain many of these documents or alternative means to obtain the information they contain. In addition, the court process itself, though it takes time to unfold, frequently produces a great deal of information you wouldn't have been able to obtain otherwise.

The Scope and Goals of Your Investigation

Typically, domestic violence victims seek help from many sources in addition to the help they seek from law enforcement. They may go to victim advocates, health workers, clergy, neighbors, counselors, para-legals, and a host of others. As you begin looking into the history, you'll likely see scores of missed opportunities where others could have or should have stepped in to save the woman's life. You'll need to decide how broadly or narrowly you want to frame your investigation. The answer to this question will generally depend on how much time you have. But do keep in mind that it is the police, prosecutors, and courts that have the primary and the sole official responsibility for providing protection from violence, for providing access to justice, and for putting the perpetrators under control.

Your Notes and Records

Get in the habit early of keeping accurate dates, times, names, addresses, and contact information on everything you do. Make copies of everything and share all information with your partner(s).

You may or may not want to use a tape recorder at interviews. The great advantage of taping interviews is that you can fully focus on the interview, and you can be assured of total accuracy. The disadvantage of tape recording is that people may be much more guarded in what they say, even if they've given you permission to record. However, most people quickly forget about a recorder and talk on with ease. Another disadvantage of tape recording is that the recording, if its existence becomes known, can potentially be pulled into any legal action stemming from the homicide.

Expert Help

Whether or not it's your first time doing this kind of investigation, you're going to have questions arising all along the way on everything from rules of evidence to your local law enforcement policies and procedures. Being able to quickly get accurate answers to these questions is crucial.

Almost always, the answers are just a phone call away. All you have to do is give a few moment's thought as to who would be best to call. Here's a few people to keep in mind for those occasions; the crime reporter on your local paper, your county law librarian, criminal defense attorneys, law enforcement officials not connected with the case, court clerks, victim advocates, your city attorney, the researchers at your local legislator's office, and many more. Don't forget that your taxes pay the salaries for most of these people. So don't be shy about picking up the phone or knocking on their doors.

Domestic Violence Death Review Teams:

Many counties in the United States now have formal domestic violence death review teams. These teams are generally made up of law enforcement and other public officials. The stated purpose of these death review teams is to look into and report on the factors leading up to the victim's death. If your county has a public team like this, you probably wonder why you should bother to duplicate the effort, especially when the people on the death review team are professionals and you're not. The answer to this question is that these public teams which are supposed to uncover the truth are too often dedicated to just the opposite.

Too often, these teams actively work to hide the truth. If you think about it for a minute, the reasons should be obvious. The public officials on death review teams don't want to expose the failures of their own agencies, especially failures that can implicate them in a homicide. So, not surprisingly, these officials are highly invested in making sure those failures stay buried.

Unfortunately, too many of these domestic violence death review teams are worse than useless because they lull the public into believing that these teams are watching out for women's safety, when in fact they are often covering up the very information the public most needs to know in order to stop future homicides.

Don't Be Intimidated:

Public officials can be very intimidating or downright bullying when they want to discourage you from obtaining information. They often lie, misinform you about your rights to records, mislead, threaten, accuse, hide, withhold, deny, dodge, and in general do whatever they feel they need to do to keep you from uncovering their mistakes . And no officials do this with more finesse and skill than officials in the criminal justice system.

Don't be intimidated. It's crucial to remember that these officials are paid by you to serve the public. Most of the time you don't need to confront their tactics head on. Just be aware, be smart, and find a way around them.

Interviewing the Family and Friends of the Victim

The family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and associates of domestic violence homicide victims have an immense amount to tell you about the victim's story. Because domestic violence develops into homicide over such a long period of time, the victim has usually spoken numerous times to people close to her. In fact, it's likely that a number of people close to the victim have been present at the times the victim has sought help. They also likely have possession of key writings and documents in the case.

If you haven't done this before, you may very well feel hesitant about approaching the victim's family and friends because of the intensity of their grief. This hesitation is natural. But don't let it stop you.

In our experience the family and friends of domestic violence homicide victims usually want very much to talk. Remember that they've likely seen the victim struggle over months or even years. They're often deeply disturbed that more wasn't done to help her. Most of the victim's family and friends not only welcome the opportunity to talk, they also desperately want to see that the failures and mishandling of the case be exposed. Most are profoundly grateful for what you're doing, and many want to get actively involved in trying to help you any way they can.

Of course, if there's someone who doesn't want to talk, you need to respect their wishes. Always try to leave the door open for their reconsidering at a later date.

Here are a few things to help you get started on interviewing family and friends:

- Introduce yourself and your purpose honestly and directly. You may say something like this: "Hello, we're women's rights advocates. We'd like to talk with you about your daughter's death because we want to help prevent the deaths of other women."
- Begin slowly. Be kind. Always ask people if they have any questions. Answer their questions honestly. If people want to put conditions or restrictions on the interview, discuss the issues honestly and always abide by any agreement you make.
- Don't let yourself get pulled too far into people's grief or into solving their problems. It doesn't help them or you if you become overwhelmed. Be compassionate and gentle, but clarify and stick to the boundaries of your work. In regard to the many problems people face at a time like this, you may or may not want to take the time to search out and connect people to the services that can help.
- Once you begin asking your questions, don't be afraid to keep the person on track. In the moments when people become overwhelmed with emotion, take a minute or two to relax. Then ask if they'd like to continue, or to continue at another time.
- Whenever possible, ask your questions in a logical order and introduce your line of questioning with a clear statement of what you want to know. For example, you can set the course by saying something like, "I'd like to start by having you tell me about how you know the woman and what you can tell me about her as a person." Then move to your next line of questioning by saying, "Now I'd like to focus on what you can tell me about the victim's contacts with law enforcement, starting from the first time you can

remember working up to the present." If the person has a tendency to go off on tangents, the logical order you establish makes it easier to coax the person back on track. It also helps assure that you don't miss key events. A time line from beginning to end is always one of the best coordinates to follow. Sticking to given subject area also helps you order your own thoughts.

At the same time, you don't want to make your line of questioning so rigid that you suppress information that doesn't fit into the box you've established. Striking just the right balance, like all other aspects of interviewing, is an art you develop along the way.

- Don't tire people out. People who are traumatized tire very, very quickly. If the person you're interviewing has a lot of information, it's probably best to cover it in a series of contacts rather than trying to cover it all at once. Get in the habit of asking people from time to time throughout the interview if they're getting tired, and if they'd like to take a break or continue at another time.
- The victim's family often has copies of key documents in the case. Don't ever take the only copy of a document from family and friends. Always get copies made and leave the original or parent copy with the person who had possession.
- Try to obtain photographs of the victim. Again, get a copy, not an original.
- Engage the person in helping you brainstorm other people you should talk to and other leads you should follow. Encourage those who want to get involved. Many delve into the project with passion. But don't be upset if someone can't follow through. The grieving process sets its own course, and people going through it are buffeted in ways they can't control.

Working with and establishing a relationship with the victim's family is also very beneficial in helping you get documents and in later dealing with the press. In forming this relationship, take exquisite care that each step is according to their wishes.

- Don't forget to consider others in the victim's life such as co-workers, classmates, neighbors, clergy, teachers. Sometimes domestic violence victims try to protect those most close to them and choose to confide more in a co-worker or other acquaintance.
- Always leave the door open to follow up with more talks.

Interviewing the Perprator's Family and Friends

The suggestions for interviewing family and friends of the perpetrator aren't all that different from interviewing the victim's family and friends. Family and friends of the perpetrator are generally going to be traumatized by the events too. Even if they blamed the woman for the couple's problems, or were in fact part of the problem, they likely also felt helpless and desperate as they watched events escalate way beyond what they anticipated. They too are often agonized that authorities maybe didn't intervene sufficiently when things could have been stopped.

The one main difference, of course, is that the perpetrator's family and friends may be very reluctant to talk to you. The best way to overcome this reluctance is to communicate very clearly that your purpose is not to investigate or pass judgement on the perpetrator nor on them. Take some extra time to clearly explain that what you want to do is find out how officials and community services can better prevent this kind of tragedy in the future. Where appropriate, explain that as family or friends of the perpetrator, they are victims of this tragedy too.

Some of the perpetrator's family and friends may still refuse to talk with you. But if you've treated them carefully, you can usually get an answer to a pressing question or two. Say something like this: "I understand that you don't want to have a conversation, but can you just help me with one thing before I go?"

Interviewing Law Enforcement and Others Authorities

Interviewing law enforcement officials is a different ball game altogether. These officials are usually very cagey about answering any line of questioning even under the best of circumstances. So if and when it becomes obvious that you're digging into something that might reflect badly on them, the response of law enforcement can be downright obstructive and purposely misleading.

So why even bother talking to law enforcement at all? The answer is that law enforcement officers, more than anyone else, usually have the big answers to your most burning questions, if only you can get them to speak. So it's definitely worth your time to figure out how you're going to get them to talk or help. The strategies available to you are as wide ranging as your own abilities with people.

Here are a couple tips:

- There are some officials who may be motivated to want to give you information by a genuine moral outrage at misconduct. Some may be motivated by gripes against their agency or against individuals in it. Some may be motivated by wanting to shift blame off themselves. Some may be motivated by wanting to shift blame off their own agency onto another agency. (Police love to blame DA's, for example, and DA's love to blame police.) People low in rank, like clerks and receptionists, often know a tremendous amount and they may be motivated by resentment for the way they themselves are treated or by genuine outrage at the injustices they see.

But the main thing you have to keep in mind is that no matter how motivated an official

may be to give you information, they are also intensely motivated not to break the extremely strict codes of loyalty and silence that pervade the criminal justice system. If an official is ever going to violate these codes and risk the severe consequences, they need a way to do it as anonymously and untraceably as possible.

- Keep talking with officials even if you know they're misleading you. You may not be getting the truth, but you are getting an elaborate dance around the truth. The more steps you see in the dance, the more clues you'll be getting as to where the truth lies.
- A very good place to start talking with officials is by talking to, or preferably meeting with, the homicide investigator. The best way to make this happen is by going in with the family.

The homicide investigator is more likely than anyone to be on top of the big picture. In the course of investigating the homicide, the homicide investigator, in a very short period of time, has pulled together the pertinent criminal justice records and has talked with many of the key people in the case. As such, the homicide detective has a big picture view of the case at a very critical time.

In addition, the homicide detective is the official most likely to be sympathetic to the victim. The homicide detective has likely had to deal with children who have just lost their mother, and has heard people's spontaneous first reactions to the women's death. And way too often what the homicide investigator hears is comments of outrage like, "How come you guys are the only ones that didn't know he was going to kill her? He said he was going to kill her 50 times? Why didn't you do anything about it then?" The homicide investigators are human, too, and they too can be offended by the senselessness of the women's death.

- Plan your approach to officials before hand. And then be prepared to adapt and change quickly if things don't go as you expected. It's usually best to start by assuming the basic goodness of the person. But when you become aware that someone's misleading you, you'll need to bring on a whole other set of interviewing skills. Don't be afraid to try some of the following tricks. You might be amazed at the hidden natural talents you've had laying dormant all these years. By the way, the most important interviewing skill of all is to know which trick to use when and with whom.
 - **Play Along:** One of the easiest things to do when someone's misleading you is to just play along with it and pay attention. See how far they'll take it. And as we mentioned above, the longer they lie, the more likely you'll find out what you want to know, whether through contradictions, mistakes, carelessness, or any number of sideways communications. The key is to keep talking and pay attention.
 - **Chit-chat:** This is similar to the above except that it involves getting into long, sing-song, rambling conversations. Some people just plain enjoy chewing the fat. And if you can keep the sing-song going for long enough, rambling in and around the subject, sooner or later you end up getting told things the person never would have told you if you straight out asked the questions.

- **Divide and Conquer:** Police want to blame prosecutors, and prosecutors want to blame police. That's just one of many splits you can play on to get a few bits of information from one side and then a few bits from the other. Pretty soon you can start piecing the bits together into a picture.
- **Sudden Confrontation:** Unexpectedly and sharply putting evidence of wrongdoing in front of people doesn't usually provoke the truth. But it usually does provoke a poorly thought out spontaneous response. And in that blurted out response there's often clues to what's really going on. Use this sparingly, because it tends to make it difficult to get your next phone call returned.
- **Decoy Lullaby:** Questioning someone intently on a neutral but related subject puts the person off guard. They get lulled into an unguarded mode of explaining things to you. Then camouflage your real questions carefully, slip them into the conversation and people often give you the information you want without even being aware they did so.
- **Under the Table:** Some officials really want to give you information or documents but for obvious reasons they don't want to do so openly. If you suspect that's the case, you have to convey very subtly, yet very clearly, that you know how to handle dynamite without having it blow up at the wrong time and place. It doesn't happen too often that officials will purposely slip you sensitive information and documents, but when they do it's going to be exactly what you need.

Acquiring Documents and Records

Obtain as many relevant court files, police records, warrants, and other official records as possible. Read them carefully, and read them more than once. If you've never read legal documents before there are going to be certain notations that are confusing at first. But stick with it, and you'll quickly see that there's usually a central text in each document that tells a story in plain English. From there, you'll be able to deduce the meaning of much of the notation, and be able to ask good questions about the rest.

Key Records and where you can find them: If you don't have experience obtaining these kinds of documents, just go to the clerks who work in the record's departments of courts, police, and district attorneys. Some of these clerks are very helpful. They'll answer your questions at length and provide you with copies of what you need. As in any navigation through a bureaucracy, if one clerk doesn't help you, move on to the next.

If you are roundly refused a set of documents that you believe should be on the public record and hence be made available to you, one of the best sources of verifying this is with a phone call to the crime reporter on your local or regional newspaper. Crime reporters are pulling criminal justice system records as a routine part of their daily work. They're more familiar than anyone with what's on the public record, what's off the public record, and when, and why. These reporters are usually very willing to answer a question or two. If, indeed, you've been wrongly denied a document, ask the reporter what he or she suggests you do in order to obtain the document.

If you still aren't able to obtain the document or report, you may have to write a formal public records act request. Don't worry, it's very simple to do. (See [How to Write a Public Records](#)

[Act Request](#))

It's worth repeating that you should get as many of the relevant documents as you can. A document that may not seem particularly relevant to your needs may have other critical documents attached or summarized. For example, arrest warrants frequently have part or all of police reports attached. If the victim has minor children, the Child Protective Service reports about what to do with the children will usually have the homicide and other police reports attached.

The following is an abbreviated list of key places to get records and the kinds of records you can obtain:

At your County Courthouse you can obtain:

the perpetrator's criminal records for that county, court files, divorce records, restraining orders, warrants, and court transcripts.

At your Police and Sheriff's Department Records Office you can obtain:

crime reports, including the homicide crime report, 911 tapes, CAD (Computer Assisted Dispatch) printouts, incident reports, department general orders and policies, crime statistics, department statistics, and more,

At the Coroner's Office you can obtain the Autopsy Reports:

You may wonder why you would want to look at the autopsy report thinking that it's just a clinical description of the victim's injury and death. But the medical examiner usually includes a summary of what he or she was told by other officials investigating the case.

At the City and County Clerk's Office you can obtain:

Sex and race discrimination lawsuits against a public agency or public official. These lawsuits can give you a general idea of the atmosphere in a particular agency. They can also give you important background on particular officers. In fact, if you're finding that there is a particular officer or two who badly mishandled the victim's case, be sure and look up divorce records and restraining orders pertaining to that officer.

Family and Friends of the Victim:

Don't forget that family and friends of the victim are very likely to have copies of important documents such as police reports, restraining orders, and child protective service records. Remember never to take a person's only copy of a document. Get a new copy made for yourself.

There is one document in particular the family may have that's worth special attention. Child Protective Service (CPS) records dealing with the placement of the victim's children following the homicide are extremely valuable to your investigation. They are also virtually impossible to obtain officially. Child Protective Services (sometimes called the Child Welfare Agency or other similar name) maintain their records under the strictest confidentiality. However, you can often obtain these crucial records for the simple reason that the homicide victim's mother, or other close relative, usually gets a copy of these records soon after the homicide since they are the one's most likely to be seeking custody of the children.

The reason CPS records are so valuable to you is that in making the determination of where

the children should go, CPS gets early copies of all relevant law enforcement reports, including an early copy of the homicide report and other reports even if the police haven't yet finished their investigation. The CPS file is usually chock full of invaluable documents, crime reports, summaries, and histories. Keep looking for it until you find it. In one homicide investigation we did, the CPS file contained virtually every documented we needed. Not only that, but we would have had immense difficulty obtaining these documents any other way since the court case against the perpetrator hadn't even begun.

Following the Homicide Case in Court

If a suspect has been arrested for the murder, a schedule of court proceedings will generally begin in a matter of days. It's very worthwhile to attend these hearings as the information begins to spill out. You may think, for example, that a bail reduction hearing doesn't have much to do with what you're interested in, but in the arguments back and forth between the attorneys, there's often a lot of information that begins to spill out.

The information on when and where these proceedings will occur is readily available to the public. As long as you have the defendant's full name, and best if you have his date of birth, you can simply call the district attorney's office or the county jail. You generally don't have to go any further than to ask the receptionist who answers the phone. She or he will have a computer in front of them and be able to give you the dates, times, courtrooms of the upcoming court appearance. In addition, these receptionists can generally give you the charges that have been filed, the bail, court orders that have been issued in the case, the names of the prosecutor, defense attorney, and judge, and the purpose of the next hearing. All you have to do is ask.

The receptionists in the District Attorney's office, though they are usually heavily overworked, often can also quite accurately answer many of your questions on the nature of these proceedings. Ask them.

How to Write Up Your Investigation Findings

Look again at the examples of write-ups on our website at www.justicewomen.com and on the Purple Berets web site at www.purpleberets.org.

Then start writing:

- Keep it simple! So people can't miss your major points.
- Organize it logically! So people aren't confused.
- Keep it short! So people will read it. Keep your report to two or three pages. If you absolutely have to include more details or documents, include them as attachments.
- Keep it to the point! State your main point right away, stick to it, and keep tangential points to a minimum.
- Include a Photograph of the Victim!
- Give One or Two Simple, Concrete Examples of What People Can Do to Help

What to do With Your Investigation Findings

Stopping domestic violence requires that everyone be involved. This means you need to get the attention of as many people as possible. And that means making good use of the media: radio, print, internet, TV, leaflets, letters to the editor, and more. As daunting as it sounds, it shouldn't be all that difficult. Murder is always of interest to the media. In addition, people's consciousness has at least evolved to the point of understanding that women don't deserve to die. In fact, a large enough percentage of the public is sufficiently incensed by domestic violence homicide, they want to know why. And you have an answer.

Another huge advantage you have with the media is that you've done their work for them. You have a well worked story; researched, documented, written, and ready to go. This makes media people, just like anyone else, very happy. So don't hesitate to pick up the phone and talk to the news directors, feature editors, and talk show hosts of your local and regional media.

Here's a couple more media tips:

- Before going to the media, be sure you have talked thoroughly with the people you interviewed. Are they willing to talk to the press? Under what conditions? And on which subjects? Media interviews are always negotiable and you and anyone you connect to the media should be clear ahead of time on the limits you want to set with the media.
- Don't ever give the media your only copy of anything no matter how much they promise to give it back. If you do, you'll probably never see it again. Get copies made ahead of time of everything.
- Don't go into an interview passively allowing the media to direct the interview or show. This is one of the biggest mistakes people make with the media. You decide what you want to talk about and say. Know exactly the one or two points you want to make ahead of time and no matter what questions are asked slide your answers back to your one or two main points. This way you control the interview.

If you allow the interviewer to take you off on tangents, you're likely to be devastated to see that the only statement of yours that got aired was the tangent and your main point was completely left out. There's only one way you can prevent this. Stick to your main point, and don't allow the media person to lead you astray. Media is sound bites. So keep it simple and tight.

- Be conscious of the power you have in your hands. Media works very fast, so fast and shark-like in it's grab, that you might feel it's not worth the trouble. But even 30 seconds or 5 paragraphs of media is an immense power to educate a huge number of people. Just think how much advertisers are willing to pay for the same time or space. So it's definitely worth all the time and energy you've put into it even if 30 seconds is all you get.

- No matter how prepared you were for the media event, expect to be misquoted, to have the story slanted, and to have opposing views be given more space than your views, especially if those opposing views come from law enforcement or other authorities. In fact, if you are presenting evidence of law enforcement failures, expect that law enforcement will lie outrageously about the facts and probably lie about you too. As enraging as all this is, it's pretty standard fare. You can't control it, you can only try to minimize it with solid evidence and good anticipation of what the opposition will say.

So get ready with your thickest skin. Don't waste your breath griping back at the media even when you're misquoted, because their skin is thicker than yours. Just keep reminding yourself that the fact that you got the issues raised on the big stage of media is a dynamite accomplishment and a powerful step forward in awakening your community. Remember too, that many people can read between the lines.

- Keep the story alive. Be creative. Go to other media with another angle; with material that was left out, another person to interview, building off an aspect of the opposition, or community response.
- Don't miss the opportunity to present solutions. Pick one or two critical changes you think need to be made to save other women's lives. Give people a concrete and simple that people can call for these changes to be made

Feel free to photocopy and distribute this information as long as you keep the credit and text intact.

**Copyright © Marie De Santis,
Women's Justice Center,
www.justicewomen.com
rdjustice@monitor.net**