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Westchester Expands Innovative Program to Prevent Domestic Violence - Multi-Agency Team to Assess Those at High-Risk

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Westchester Expands Innovative Program to Prevent Domestic Violence - Multi-Agency Team to Assess Those at High-Risk

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Westchester County is creating an expanded crisis intervention team that will identify families at highest risk of deadly domestic violence and intervene to save lives by providing immediate support and services.

The Westchester County Domestic Violence High Risk Team, which is already at work in several parts of the County, will expand its work Countywide and continue to pioneer a multi-agency, collaborative approach to preventing lethal family violence.

"I am proud to announce this new initiative that will provide enhanced safety to victims of family violence. The collaboration between community, County agencies, law enforcement and service providers makes Westchester stand out as a national model for coordinated community response that can improve outcomes for victims and increase offender accountability," County Executive George Latimer said.

Partners in the high-risk team include the Westchester County Office for Women, Westchester County Department of Public Safety, Westchester County Probation Department, Westchester County District Attorney's Office, Westchester Medical Center, Hope's Door, My Sister's Place, Putnam/Northern Westchester Women's Resource Center, Westchester Community Opportunity Program/Victims Assistance Services, Legal Services of Hudson Valley, and the Elizabeth S. Haub School

At Pace University/Women's Justice Center. Other County agencies such as the Departments of Social Services and Community Mental Health are resources for the team.

At the heart of the expanded effort is a Lethality Assessment Program and 24-hour hotline. These tools will enable police departments, County agencies and service providers to immediately identify persons and families at high risk of being murdered or seriously harmed by an intimate partner or other family member. A safety plan and services will be provided promptly to these victims to reduce the odds that such deadly violence might occur.

"The implementation of a high-risk team in Westchester County is an integral step in reducing lethality and risk of serious harm to victims of family violence. To be harmed by someone that is supposed to love and protect you is unfathomable to most, but it is a reality throughout the world, regardless of race, ethnicity, income or gender. It is only by working together that we can change this reality," said Robi Schlaff, director of the County's Office for Women.

Latimer said the high-risk team will be coordinated by the Office for Women, which will collect data and ensure compliance by all partners with their roles and responsibilities. Enhanced training in lethality assessment will be offered to all law enforcement agencies in Westchester at the Westchester County Police Academy. The training will be incorporated into the Police Academy curriculum for new recruits as well as in the in-service training program provided to veteran police officers.

Public Safety Commissioner Thomas A. Gleason said the Lethality Assessment Program, or LAP, gives police officers in the field a practical tool they can use to assess the level of risk when they respond to any domestic incident.

"There is nothing theoretical about the potential for deadly family violence. We have suffered these tragedies in Westchester. We know all too well that it can happen here, because it has happened here. No one wants it to happen again," he said.

LAP begins with a simple but effective set of 11 questions. The answers to those questions guide an officer in assessing the level of immediate danger that a spouse or partner, even an entire family, may be in.

"This objective assessment tool is also important as it shows victims and their children that they may be at greater risk than they realize," Schlaff said.

Under the expanded program, the Westchester Medical Center will staff an emergency hotline around-the-clock to be informed of high-risk cases. Advocates will provide immediate assistance to these victims, including crisis intervention, safety planning and referrals for emergency housing and other critical services.

The service providers on the high-risk team will train hotline staff and other advocates in high-risk response and protocols, follow up with high-risk victims within 24 hours and obtain victims' consent to obtain critical services for them.

The legal services providers will assist victims in a range of civil family law matters including child custody and support, immigration assistance and obtaining orders of protection. The Probation Department and District Attorney's Office will work with victims to ensure offender accountability and assist in creating related training for the law enforcement community.

The expanded high-risk team will incorporate the Northern Westchester Domestic Violence High Risk Team, which operates in a number of north county communities. Law enforcement in those towns, as well as in the City of White Plains, already utilizes the Lethality Assessment Program.

Latimer said Westchester County has seen multiple tragedies in the last decade in which intimate partners killed their spouse, some of their children, or the entire family. Identifying families that are under stress and at high-risk for violence is a challenging task, Latimer said, but every effort must be made to curb domestic violence and save lives.

"The work we are doing through the high-risk team is in honor and memory of those we have lost in our County to this horrific family violence. All of the partners in this effort are committed to doing everything possible to prevent these kinds of tragedies from taking place," Latimer said.

