

COVERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A Guide for Journalists and Other
Media Professionals

WASHINGTON STATE COALITION

WSCADV

AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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Washington State Coalition
Against Domestic Violence

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**The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
is a statewide non-profit organization committed to ending
domestic violence through advocacy and action for social change.**

Founded in 1990 by survivors of domestic violence and their allies, WSCADV is a non-profit network of over 60 domestic violence victim advocacy programs across the state of Washington. Our work includes public policy advocacy, training and technical assistance to advocates and other professionals, research, producing educational tools, and promoting awareness about domestic violence.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Domestic Violence Overview	2
Media Coverage of Domestic Violence Fatalities	3
Domestic Violence Statistics	6
Washington’s Domestic Violence Laws: Overview	9
Tips for Accurately Covering Domestic Violence Crimes	12
What to Avoid When Covering Domestic Violence Crimes	15
Information and Resources	18
Appendix A: Domestic Violence Crimes Reported by Washington State Law Enforcement Agencies for the Year 2006.....	A-1
Appendix B: Domestic Violence Direct Service Agencies in Washington State by County	B-1

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a difficult issue to investigate and a complicated one to report. This guide is designed to assist journalists in accurately covering domestic violence homicides and other related stories. In 2005, 50% of women who were murdered in Washington state were killed by their current or former husband or boyfriend.¹ Because many reporters find themselves covering domestic violence murders, we have compiled the following information to assist in accurate coverage.

Murder is on the extreme end of a continuum of tactics that abusers may use to exert power and control over their intimate partners. Abusers use a pattern of coercive behaviors that tend to increase in frequency and severity over time. It is not unusual, however, for reporters to hear that an abuser was “a model employee,” that neighbors thought the abuser was “a sweet person,” and that the abuser volunteered at the local school. Abusers often show a different face to the world than they do to their intimate partners. Understanding the dynamics of domestic violence, and talking to domestic violence experts to put the crime into its social context, will clarify that this apparent inconsistency is not unusual, atypical or shocking.

Our hope is that the information in this guide will also help link journalists to domestic violence advocates in their community, who can be utilized as sources to improve coverage. By accurately covering domestic violence homicides and avoiding sources, questions and language that perpetuate myths, journalists can make a significant difference in helping the community understand how domestic violence can go unchecked to the point of murder.

The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence can provide local, state and national statistics on domestic violence. Interviews with Coalition staff can assist journalists in accurately reflecting the context of domestic violence crimes, local resources available for victims and abusers, and the opinions of experts in the field. Please contact Kelly Starr, Communications Coordinator, at 206-389-2515 ext. 210 or kelly@wscadv.org.

¹ *If I Had One More Day: Findings and Recommendations from the Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review*, Kelly Starr and Jake Fawcett for the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2006.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OVERVIEW

What is domestic violence? Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive tactics—including emotional, physical, sexual and/or economic abuse—that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners to gain or maintain power and control over them. Abusers do not batter because they are out of control. Domestic violence is not an angry outburst, it is a learned behavior. This learned behavior is further reinforced when abusers are not arrested, prosecuted or otherwise held accountable for their actions. Abusers often receive the message from society at large that violence against women is acceptable.

Who are victims? Victims of domestic violence cross all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, educational, age and religious lines. Studies have shown no characteristic link between personality type and being a victim in an abusive relationship.²

Who are abusers? Like victims, domestic violence abusers come from all backgrounds. However, abusers do share some characteristics in that they tend to justify their abusive behaviors, fail to take responsibility for the abuse and use similar tactics to gain and maintain power and control over their partners. Abusers typically present a different personality outside of their relationship than they do to their intimate partner, which complicates victims' ability to describe their experience and seek assistance.

People commonly ask: “Why do victims stay in abusive relationships?” Victims of domestic violence do not leave their abusers for a variety of reasons. These include fear (a significant number of women murdered by their partners are either estranged, separated or in the process of leaving the relationship),³ and a lack of: affordable housing, child care, employment opportunities and effective legal protection from the abuser. Religious and cultural beliefs, family or community pressures, immigration status and the desire to keep a family together may also make leaving an abusive relationship difficult. Despite multiple barriers, many victims of domestic violence do leave their abusers. Leaving is a process that takes place over time. The victims' choices, however, are not the issue. The responsibility for domestic violence (as it is for other crimes) belongs solely to the abuser.

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² G.T. Hotaling and D.B. Sugarman, “An Analysis of Risk Markers in Husband to Wife Violence: The Current State of Knowledge,” *Violence and Victims* 1(2), 1986.

³ *If I Had One More Day: Findings and Recommendations from the Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review*, WSCADV, 2006; also, Neil Websdale, *Understanding Domestic Homicide*, Northeastern University Press, 1999.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FATALITIES

Researchers have studied news coverage of domestic violence fatalities in several states. In 2002, a study of news coverage in Washington was published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.⁴ The findings of this study and a study of Rhode Island newspaper coverage⁵ are highlighted below.

Overview of the two studies

In the Washington study, researchers from the University of Washington School of Communications examined all news coverage of domestic violence fatalities by all community and daily papers in Washington state in 1998. This included news coverage of 44 domestic violence fatality cases in 40 newspapers, a total of 230 individual newspaper articles.

The Boston College Media Research Action Project, in collaboration with the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, focused on 88 news articles reporting on 12 domestic violence murders in the years 1996 to 1999.

Generally, the studies found that reports of domestic violence fatalities did not accurately cover these incidents because of failures to:

- identify the act as a domestic violence crime and place the murder in the larger context of domestic violence murders locally and nationally;
- provide accurate information about the nature of domestic violence; and
- utilize experts as sources for stories.

Moreover, news stories regarding domestic violence murders often reinforced myths and inaccuracies about domestic violence by implying victim-blaming or abuser-excusing attitudes, blaming the act on cultural or class differences, and reinforcing the idea that the fatal violence came out of the blue as opposed to being the culmination of a history of violence and controlling behaviors.

Domestic violence murders were rarely labeled as domestic violence or placed in a broader context

The Washington researchers found that while all 230 articles they studied were focused on coverage of domestic violence-related deaths, less than 22% of the articles specifically labeled the incident as domestic violence. Only 30% of the articles included mention of evidence of prior domestic violence, such as a protection order or prior police response to the address.

Only 10% of the articles placed the domestic violence murder in the larger context of domestic violence. The authors of the Washington study noted that almost without

⁴ C.F. Bullock and J.Cubert, "Coverage of Domestic Violence Fatalities by Newspapers in Washington State," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, May 2002, vol. 17, no. 5, 475-499.

⁵ "Rhode Island Media Study: 1996-1999" in *Domestic Violence: A Handbook for Journalists*, produced by the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2000.

exception “the coverage tends to portray the incident as a lone murder rather than as part of a larger social problem.”

The Rhode Island study found a similar pattern. Less than 20% of the articles made clear links to the concept of domestic violence; a minority of the Rhode Island reporters discussed murders in relationship to local domestic violence crime statistics, community resources or the dynamics of abuse. In cases of homicide-suicides, in which the abuser killed himself as well, reporters often labeled the case a “family tragedy” and were less likely to frame the case in terms of domestic violence, even when evidence of prior domestic violence existed.

Coverage provided an inaccurate view of domestic violence and reinforced myths

A significant portion of the Washington articles (48%) suggested some sort of excuse for the violence by the abuser (e.g., “rejection, rage may have led to murder”). A smaller percentage (17%) included victim-blaming language (e.g., quoting a relative who noted that the victim “had a habit of getting involved with men who abused her”).

Some articles focused on culture or class differences when reporting on individual murders (e.g., “Cambodian man kills wife”), leaving the reader with the false impression that intimate partner homicides may be confined to only parts of the population.

Many of the Washington articles seemed to imply that generally, domestic violence abusers are easily identifiable, and therefore it was surprising and newsworthy that in the particular case covered, the perpetrator of the murder seemed normal. However, the extensive literature on intimate partner violence clearly indicates that abusers often function normally socially and within their work environments, and that they are not easily identifiable. To imply otherwise (e.g., quoting a neighbor emphasizing that the murderer was a “well-rounded, upbeat person” or a “clean-cut, very nice guy”) conveys a distorted view of the reality of domestic violence.

The Rhode Island study found that journalists portrayed domestic violence murders as “unpredictable private tragedies” instead of as an extension of a pattern of abuse, or as part of a widespread crime. This theme dominated even when journalists cited evidence of warning signs of lethality, including histories of abuse, protection orders, recent separations and even murders of prior intimate partners.

Researchers in Rhode Island also found stories which inaccurately depicted the dynamics of domestic violence, or reinforced common myths, such as: it doesn’t happen around here, substance abuse causes violence, or violence was part of a tragic love (e.g., quoting a sister of an abuser who said, “He loved them [wife and children] so much he took them with him”).

Sources shaped the stories and were often limited or poorly chosen

The Washington study found that domestic violence experts were rarely quoted in stories covering domestic violence fatalities. Only eleven articles quoted a domestic violence expert; ten of these quotes were clustered in coverage of three particular deaths which received extensive news coverage. The majority of cases (40 out of 44) were covered with no expert input at all.

It seemed that reporters relied heavily upon police reports and police comments for articles on domestic violence homicides, perhaps assuming that these were a neutral source of information. However, reporters should be aware that law enforcement officers may have misinformation about the dynamics of abuse and may inaccurately frame the incident.

Researchers in the Rhode Island study also noted that reporters' sources shaped their stories. Friends, family, and neighbors tended to be reluctant to "speak ill of the dead" and often initially denied knowledge of prior abuse, or gave positive descriptions of the perpetrators of the murders. Police focused on describing who was involved and the evidence, but seldom could place the crime in a community context. Co-workers tended to place blame on the partner of the person they worked with, whether they worked with the victim or the abuser. *Importantly, the study found that when domestic violence experts were quoted, they were able to place the murder in a larger context and bring forward information about community response and prevention.*

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE STATISTICS

Domestic Violence Fatalities in Washington State

- Between January 1, 1997 and June 30, 2006, at least 359 people were killed by domestic violence abusers in Washington state. (This number most likely represents an undercount, as a significant portion of homicides are unsolved, some homicides may be mistakenly classified as accidents, and some missing persons cases may actually be homicides.) The homicide victims included domestic violence victims, their friends, family members, new partners and intervening law enforcement officers. The majority of the homicide victims (62%) were women killed by their current or former husband or boyfriend.⁶
- In 2005, 50% of women who were murdered in Washington state were killed by their current or former husband or boyfriend.
- Some domestic violence abusers killed their children along with their partner, or instead of their partner. Between January 1, 1997 and June 30, 2006, abusers killed at least 32 children in the context of violence towards their intimate partner.
- Homicide-suicides comprised a significant portion of domestic violence homicides. Almost a third (32%) of the 320 abusers who committed homicides between January 1, 1997 and June 30, 2006, committed homicide-suicides. An additional twelve abusers killed themselves after attempting homicide.
- Firearms were the most common weapon used in domestic violence homicides. Between January 1, 1997 and June 30, 2006, domestic violence abusers used firearms to kill 56% of domestic violence homicide victims.

Source: *If I Had One More Day: Findings and Recommendations from the Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review*, Kelly Starr and Jake Fawcett for the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2006.

Domestic Violence in Washington State

- Washington police departments responded to 49,980 domestic violence calls in 2006. These included domestic violence homicides, rapes, assaults, robberies and arsons (see Appendix A for breakdown by crime and county).
- Victims of domestic violence reported 12,267 violations of protection orders in 2006 (see Appendix A for breakdown by county).

Source: Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, *Crime in Washington State 2006*.

⁶ The Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review (DVFR) defines a domestic violence fatality as any fatality caused by a domestic violence abuser's efforts to gain power and control over their intimate partner. This differs from Washington's legal definition of domestic violence; thus, the DVFR's statistics are different from those reported by official legal resources, such as the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs.

- In Washington state fiscal year (FY) 2006,⁷ domestic violence programs provided emergency shelter to a total of 6,147 domestic violence victims and their children. Because of space and funding limitations, domestic violence programs had to refuse 36,522 requests for shelter.⁸
- Washington state domestic violence programs served 19,456 adults and children in FY 2006. Services provided include: support groups, help obtaining protection orders, legal advocacy, shelter and individual counseling.
- The Washington State Domestic Violence Hotline answered 22,370 calls in FY 2006.

Source: Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration, Division of Program and Policy.

General Facts about Domestic Violence

- In a national survey, almost 25% of women reported having been physically assaulted and/or raped by a current or former intimate partner at some point in their lifetime.

Source: Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, "Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey," National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000.

- In a recent survey of women in Washington state and Idaho, 44% of respondents reported having experienced intimate partner violence in their adult lifetime.

Source: Robert Thompson, Amy Bonomi et al., "Intimate Partner Violence Prevalence, Types, and Chronicity in Adult Women," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 30, no. 6, 2006.

- Women are the victims of intimate violence significantly more often than men. In 2001, women accounted for 85% of the victims of intimate partner violence and men accounted for approximately 15% of the victims nationally. In 2001, intimate partner violence made up 20% of violent crime against women. The same year, intimate partners committed 3% of all violent crime against men.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Crime Data Brief, *Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001*, February 2003.

- Research has indicated that approximately 25% of teens experience dating violence, and that pregnant and parenting teens experience even higher levels of violence in their relationships. In a 2005 study of teen mothers receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families, 55% reported having experienced domestic violence in their relationship within the previous twelve months, and 66% of that group experienced some form of birth control sabotage by their boyfriend as well.

Source: Jody Raphael, "Teens Having Babies: The Unexplored Role of Domestic Violence," *The Prevention Researcher* 12, no.1, 2005.

⁷ Washington state fiscal year 2006 covers dates July 1, 2005 – June 30, 2006.

⁸ This number includes individuals for whom there was no space available, individuals seeking shelter who were not victims of domestic violence, or individuals who had certain needs the shelter could not accommodate. This is not an unduplicated number.

- A significant number of domestic violence homicides occur after or as the victim is attempting to end the relationship. In at least 47% of the homicides committed by a domestic violence abuser in Washington state, the victim had left, divorced, or separated from the abuser, or was attempting to leave or break up with the abuser at the time of the murder. In a Florida study, 60% of the women killed were separated or in the process of leaving.

Source: *If I Had One More Day: Findings and Recommendations from the Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review*, Kelly Starr and Jake Fawcett for the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2006, and Neil Websdale, *Understanding Domestic Homicide*, Northeastern University Press, 1999.

- The U.S. Department of Justice reported that 37% of all women who sought care in hospital emergency rooms for violence-related injuries were injured by a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend.

Source: Michael Rand, *Violence-related Injuries Treated in Hospital Emergency Departments*, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 1997.

- Fifty percent of men who frequently assault their wives also frequently assault their children, and the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect suggests that domestic violence may be the single major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in this country.

Source: Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families*, Transaction Publishers, 1990, and U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, *A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States, Fifth report*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995.

- Research indicates that a lack of financial resources is one of the most commonly given reasons domestic violence victims stay with or return to an abusive partner.

Source: Martha Davis, "The Economics of Abuse: How Violence Perpetuates Women's Poverty," in Ruth Brandwein, ed., *Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform: The Ties that Bind*, Sage Publications, 1999, and Eleanor Lyon, *Poverty, Welfare and Battered Women: What Does the Research Tell Us?* Welfare and Domestic Violence Technical Assistance Initiative, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 1997.

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WASHINGTON’S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LAWS: OVERVIEW

In 1979, the state legislature passed Washington’s “official response” to domestic violence, RCW 10.99.010, recognizing that domestic violence is a serious crime against society and seeking the maximum protection from abuse for victims of domestic violence. The law states in part:

[E]xisting criminal statutes are adequate to provide protection for victims of domestic violence. However, previous societal attitudes have been reflected in policies and practices of law enforcement agencies and prosecutors which have resulted in differing treatment of crimes occurring between cohabitants and of the same crimes occurring between strangers...It is the intent of the legislature that the official response to cases of domestic violence shall stress the enforcement of the laws to protect the victim and shall communicate the attitude that violent behavior is not excused or tolerated.

Who is Protected?

Under Washington’s domestic violence laws, domestic violence is a crime committed by one family or household member by another family or household member [RCW 26.50.010(1)]. Under the law, a family or household member includes:

- Spouses;
- Former spouses;
- Persons who have a child in common regardless of whether they have been married or have lived together at any time;
- Adult persons related by blood or marriage;
- Adult persons who are presently residing together or who have resided together in the past;
- Persons sixteen years of age or older who are presently residing together or who have resided together in the past and who have or have had a dating relationship;
- Persons sixteen years of age or older with whom a person sixteen years of age or older has or has had a dating relationship and;
- Persons who have a biological or legal parent-child relationship, including stepparents and stepchildren and grandparents and grandchildren.

Note: “Dating relationship” is defined as “a social relationship of a romantic nature. Factors that the court may consider in making this determination include: (a) the length of time the relationship has existed; (b) the nature of the relationship; and (c) the frequency of interaction between the parties.” [RCW 26.50.010(3)]

What is Covered?

Under Washington’s domestic violence laws [RCW 10.99.020(3)], “domestic violence” includes, but is not limited to:

- Assault (RCW 9A.36.011, 9A.36.021, 9A.36.031, 9A.36.041);
- Burglary (RCW 9A.52.020, 9A.52.030, 9A.52.025);
- Coercion (RCW 9A.36.070);
- Criminal trespass (RCW 9A.52.070, 9A.52.080);
- Drive-by shooting (RCW 9A.36.045);
- Interference with the reporting of domestic violence (RCW 9A.36.150);
- Kidnapping (RCW 9A.40.020, 9A.40.030);
- Malicious mischief (RCW 9A.48.070, 9A.48.080, 9A.48.090);
- Rape (RCW 9A.44.040, 9A.44.050);
- Reckless endangerment (RCW 9A.36.050);
- Stalking (RCW 9A.46.110);
- Unlawful imprisonment (RCW 9A.40.040);
- Violation of the provisions of a protection order, no contact order, or restraining order (RCW 10.99.040, 10.99.050, 26.09.300, 26.10.220, 26.26.138, 26.44.063, 26.44.150, 26.50.060, 26.50.070, 26.50.130, 26.52.070, 74.34.145).

Court Orders

No Contact Order

This order is issued by a criminal court subsequent to a domestic violence arrest. The court issues it at the time of a suspect’s release from custody, arraignment, trial or sentencing. Since the defendant is present at these stages of the criminal process, the existence of the order is proof that it was served. The order terminates if the defendant is acquitted, if the case is dismissed or at any time the judge chooses to terminate the order (RCW 10.99).

Protection Order

Civil courts may issue protection orders to a family or household member who has been assaulted or fears abuse from other family or household members (RCW 26.50). These orders may restrain the respondent from committing acts of domestic violence; exclude the respondent from the dwelling that the parties share, from the residence, workplace or school of the petitioner, or from the day care or school of a child; prohibit the respondent from knowingly coming within, or knowingly remaining within, a specified distance from a specified location; may make residential provisions regarding minor children; order the respondent to participate in domestic violence perpetrator treatment; restrain the respondent from having any contact with the victim of domestic violence or the victim’s children or members of the victim’s household; order use of a vehicle; order possession or use of essential personal effects; or order other relief as the court deems necessary for the protection of the petitioner and other family or household members [RCW 26.50.060(1)].

Restraining Order

This order is usually obtained upon filing a petition for dissolution, legal separation or child custody (RCW 26.09). Restraining orders may include, but are not limited to, restraining or enjoining the person from molesting or disturbing another party; restraining or enjoining the person from going onto the grounds of or entering the home, workplace or school of another party or the day care or school of any child; or prohibiting the person from knowingly coming within, or knowingly staying within, a specified distance of a location [RCW 26.09.050(2)].

Anti-Harassment Order

This order is available to people who have been alarmed, annoyed or harassed by another person (RCW 10.14). Violation of this type of order is not considered a domestic violence crime [RCW 10.99.020(3)].

Full Faith and Credit

Washington recognizes “Foreign Protection Orders” as valid orders if the court that issued the order had proper jurisdiction, over the issue and the people, to enter the order (RCW 26.52.020). Law enforcement officers are to presume that the order is valid if it appears to be authentic “on its face” (RCW 26.52.020).

“Foreign Protection Order” means an injunction or other order related to domestic or family violence, harassment, sexual abuse or stalking, with the purpose of preventing violence or threatening acts or harassment against, or contact or communication with, or physical proximity to another person issued by a court of another state, territory, or possession of the United States, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or the District of Columbia, or any United States military tribunal, or a tribal court, in a civil or criminal action [RCW 26.52.010(3)].

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TIPS FOR ACCURATELY COVERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRIMES

Place the crime in the context of domestic violence.

Include interviews with local experts to explain the crime as one means for the abuser to maintain power and control over their partner. Use the term “domestic violence” when reporting on homicides between intimate partners, as this terminology sets the context for the crime. The following is a good example:

“It is clear that Carolyn Durall experienced a life of coercive control by her husband, capped by the violent murder,” [King County Superior Court Judge Deborah] Fleck said. “This murder was the ultimate act of domestic violence.” (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10/7/00)

Acknowledge that domestic violence is not a private matter.

The crime of domestic violence impacts our community as a whole in terms of neighborhood and workplace safety, medical costs, lower economic productivity, and effects on children. Include resources that are available for victims and abusers in coverage, as well as how community members can help (see “Information and Resources” section in this guide). The following is a good example of how to incorporate this information into a story:

Kelly Abken, executive director of Domestic Violence Services...said it’s important for the community to band together (and) support victims...Domestic Violence Services of Benton and Franklin Counties operates a confidential shelter for victims of domestic violence...Victims can reach the shelter 24 hours a day at 582-9841 or 1-800-648-1277. (*Tri-City Herald*, 6/4/05)

Look into prior history of domestic violence and let the story evolve.

Ask the police if the crime matches the legal definition of domestic violence. Look for patterns of controlling behavior in the relationship, and place the crime in this context. These may or may not include a prior documented history of domestic violence—talk to police, check criminal history and check court records for protection, no contact, restraining or anti-harassment orders. Talk to domestic violence advocates from local agencies for relevant statistics. Avoid treating domestic violence homicides and homicide-suicides as inexplicable, unpredictable tragedies. They are not. In most cases, a little digging will uncover this truth. The following are some good examples:

Reading from court documents, Spokane County Court Commissioner Annette Plese said Meek has lived in Spokane since February 1999. She noted that he has two felony convictions and then set Meek’s bail at \$1 million. One conviction, in Kitsap County, WA, was for first-degree child molestation in 1997. He was found guilty by a jury and sentenced to 89 months in prison. Local court records showed no restraining orders filed against Meek by Castillo. Reports of domestic violence are on the rise in the Spokane area. In 1996, law enforcement responded to 10,944 calls for domestic violence assistance. In 1999, the number had risen to 12,296. (*Spokane Spokesman-Review*, 10/13/00)

Court records show that Collelo applied for, and received, a protective order in May, asking to keep Barber away from her, their residence and their children. In her petition, Colello said Barber had thrown kitchen chairs, breaking them and putting holes in the wall while screaming at her. In previous incidents, he pushed her often and gave her a black eye while she was pregnant, the petition said. In 1995, he threw her through a door and was arrested, but the case was thrown out because she told the judge everything was all right, the petition stated. (*South County Journal*, 8/8/01)

Convey that domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that often escalates when a victim is trying to leave, or has left, the relationship.

The following examples are good illustrations:

Valerie Stafford, executive director of Citizens Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse, said the case is a classic example of how domestic abuse can turn into murder. “He killed her during the process of her probably leaving him,” she said. “That’s what we try to teach people. That’s when it’s most violent and dangerous. When the victim is trying to leave and there’s no more cards to play.” (*Whidbey News-Times*, 12/9/01)

The case...appears to fit a pattern that authorities see in abusive relationships. When one partner is killed or seriously injured, it is usually because the abusive partner has begun to lose control, Thurston County Sheriff’s Chief Criminal Deputy Dan Kimball said. (*The Olympian*, 4/14/05)

Illustrate the warning signs of an abusive relationship.

Ask: Were there any warning signs of domestic violence? Ask family/friends/co-workers: Was the abuser a jealous person? Had the abuser and victim gotten involved quickly? Did the victim ever have bruises or marks that were explained away? Did the victim seem withdrawn or depressed? If the victim ended the relationship, what was the abuser’s reaction to this?

Because abusers tend to isolate their partners from the outside world, ask: How did the abuser feel about his partner working? Was the victim allowed to see family and friends? Did the abuser call or drop by the victim’s workplace frequently? Was the couple always together? Was the victim able to see friends, family or co-workers without the abuser?

Some of these signs may be viewed positively by friends and family, indicative of a close and loving relationship, and not recognized as controlling tactics that are warning signs of potential abuse. The following is a good example of incorporating warning signs of an abusive relationship into the story:

...she blamed herself for the beatings, she broke up more than once with her boyfriend, went back to him and believed she had no options...She stopped attending church regularly, and when friends stopped by to see her, Markoskie [the abuser] chased them away...Communication with her mother, always difficult because there was no phone in Arnett’s cabin, became even rarer...Arnett had become so isolated by the time she died that police didn’t know about her death until hours later, after Markoskie went to a friend’s house and allegedly admitted shooting Arnett in the head during a fight. (*Tacoma News Tribune*, 12/6/98)

When interviewing a domestic violence survivor, consider the safety and confidentiality needs of the interviewee.

Ask the survivor if it is safe to use their real name or if a fictitious name would protect them and their family more effectively. Ask the survivor if they would like to speak to an advocate from the local domestic violence program prior to being interviewed to discuss the potential safety and confidentiality concerns of sharing their story with the media.

The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence can provide local, state and national statistics on domestic violence. Interviews with Coalition staff can assist journalists in accurately reflecting the context of domestic violence crimes, local resources available for victims and abusers, and the opinions of experts in the field. Please contact Kelly Starr, Communications Coordinator, at 206-389-2515 ext. 210 or kelly@wscadv.org.

WHAT TO AVOID WHEN COVERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRIMES

Media coverage is inaccurate when it perpetuates myths and stereotypes about domestic violence.

Avoid calling domestic violence a “relationship problem.”

Avoid statements that describe an abusive relationship as a “violent relationship” or “troubled marriage.” These phrases inaccurately describe abuse as an issue between two people and obscures the fact that the abuser bears the responsibility for the violence. Accurate coverage describes domestic violence as an abuser committing a crime against another person. Refrain from using words like “domestic dispute,” “quarrel” or “argument,” as they detract from the violent and criminal nature of the behavior. Here are some problematic examples:

Last month, Pheach moved out when years of marital difficulties came to a boiling point, Murray said. (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 11/10/97)

A South End Tacoma man grabbed an assault rifle and started firing Sunday afternoon when he couldn't fix his failing marriage. (*Tacoma News Tribune*, 11/10/97)

He [the police chief] said the couple's tempestuous relationship could be to blame for the slaying. (*Seattle Times*, 2/3/07)

Do not focus on the victim's behavior or use victim-blaming language.

The victim in an abusive relationship is not responsible for the crime of domestic violence. Questions that imply that a victim could have done something to prevent the violence are misleading and imply that the abuser was somehow justified in committing the violent crime. It is more accurate to focus on the abuser and address how our communities can hold abusers accountable for their crimes, and improve the safe options available to victims of domestic violence. Be aware that questions or comments can be phrased in such a way as to imply blame, and that this is not unbiased, non-judgmental coverage. For example, don't ask: “Why did she stay?”, but rather: “What were the barriers she faced in leaving the abusive relationship?” or “In what ways did the community try, or fail, to hold the abuser accountable for prior abuse?” The following quote implies that the murder was the victim's fault, and appeared in a story without any balancing perspective or information from experts:

Outside of court, defense attorney James Egan said the shooting was a “terrible, terrible tragedy,” but he defended his client as an otherwise law-abiding citizen who became embroiled in a rocky marriage. The problems started, Egan said, when the couple moved to the Tri-Cities and Tara Jensen began receiving letters from Justin Matyas, an inmate at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla...Egan says the letters from Matyas coerced Tara Jensen into witchcraft, putting a strain on the Jensens' marriage. “It drove him crazy,” Egan said. “That and [her] drinking.” (*Tri-City Herald*, 9/27/00)

Do not assume some cultures or classes are violent, and others are not.

Focusing on the economic status or ethnicity of the victim or abuser confuses the point that domestic violence crosses all lines of race, class and culture. These factors may influence the specific tactics an abuser uses in order to maintain power and control in the relationship; however, blaming class, race or culture when an abuser kills their partner reinforces myths that some groups are more violent than others.

He [Sam Lau] planned, acted, and executed—in the end rounding up the family in an upstairs room of the home they bought seven years ago and shooting them in front of each other. The experts guess it could have been a cultural instinct—a disgrace to kill only himself and leave his family to bear the onus of his suicide and possible financial ruin. (*Eastside Week*, 6/25/97)

Avoid using sources emotionally connected to the abuser or sources that do not have significant information about the crime or those involved.

Consider the sources when covering a domestic violence homicide and be aware of how source selection shapes the story. While it is important to interview family, friends and co-workers, keep in mind that they may be reluctant to speak negatively about the abuser and may not present an accurate picture of a history of violence. Sources may also be hesitant to speak negatively of the dead. Almost a third of domestic violence homicides are homicide-suicides. In these cases, neighbors, family and friends may comment on how nice the abuser was. Often people know about the abuse, but do not want to say anything negative about a person who has just committed suicide.

In these examples, acquaintances and friends speak well of the murderer or deny their capacity for violence, in one case in spite of knowledge of a prior domestic violence assault:

Outside the small home, Nick Pilege shook his head trying to fathom what had occurred the night before [when Barber had stabbed his partner to death, and had attempted to kill his two pre-school-aged daughters by stabbing them in the neck]. Pilege, 36, said he had known Barber for nearly a decade, describing him as “one of the most steady, calm, level-headed guys I know. I didn’t know of a violent bone in his body. I just can’t believe it.” But one night a couple of years ago, Pilege recalled, Colello had called him saying that Barber had been arrested for domestic violence. “I actually bailed him out,” Pilege said. (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 8/7/01)

Neighbors described the husband as a friendly person who kept an immaculate lawn. (*Kitsap Sun*, 11/7/05)

Many words describe Trevor Saunders. His friends use words like sweet, accepting, joking, mentor, brother...“Maybe he just had a bad moment, a mistake [when he shot and killed his ex-girlfriend, her co-worker and himself],” said a close friend of Saunders. “We’ve all made mistakes we wish we could take back...I want people to know Trevor was the kindest guy. It wasn’t like Trevor to do anything to hurt anyone.” (*The Moscow-Pullman News*, 12/14/05)

“They were great people. Doug was the type of guy who would give you the shirt off his back,” said a friend. (*Tri-City Herald*, 8/27/06)

Interviewing neighbors at the crime scene often results in shocked responses that imply that domestic violence homicides are isolated, unpredictable acts that do not occur in “this neighborhood.” Talk to neighbors to see if they may have heard shouting or cries for help, or seen the police make visits to the home in the past. However, recognize that the natural response at a crime scene is shock and disbelief, and that neighbors often feel the need to say something if questioned. If it is clear that a neighbor does not really know anything about the situation, do not use them as a source, as was done in these examples:

Several Witland Lane residents said they did not know the woman or the man and did not hear any disturbance at the house Monday. Neighbor John Stephenson...said he was shocked by the news. “I guess stuff happens even out here in the country,” he said. Next-door neighbors Ursula and Richard Sharp said...“They were actually quiet neighbors. I can’t believe this.” (*The Olympian*, 8/18/98)

[A neighbor] wonders what happened in the relationship, and what caused Hitchcock to snap. (*The Olympian*, 8/26/06)

Broadening sources to include domestic violence experts helps to balance coverage and provides information about domestic violence as a community problem.

Avoid treating domestic violence crimes as an inexplicable tragedy, beyond the reach of community action.

Coverage that conveys a sense of hopelessness and helplessness implies that there is nothing people can do, when in fact people can take steps to address domestic violence in their communities by learning about the warning signs, resources available, and how to support a friend or family member experiencing violence in their relationship (see “Information and Resources” section of this guide). Communities can also work together to address holding abusers accountable. The following example is problematic in that it describes domestic violence as an issue that cannot be explained and offers no information on how a community’s response can impact change:

Seattle Outpaced in Domestic-Violence Slayings – If current trends continue, the homicide count this year in the unincorporated suburbs and small cities of King County will far outpace Seattle’s, a statistical anomaly that law enforcement officials say is impossible to explain. (*Seattle Times*, 3/12/99)

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INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

The following resource information can be incorporated into coverage of domestic violence:

- Warning signs
- How to help
- Safety planning
- Crisis hotlines

Warning Signs of Domestic Violence

Jealousy, controlling behavior, quick involvement, unrealistic expectations, isolation, blames others for problems or feelings, hypersensitivity, cruelty to children, cruelty to animals, use of force during sex, verbal abuse, rigid sex roles, Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde personality, past battering, threats of violence, breaking or striking objects, using force during an argument, controlling finances in the relationship

Suggestions for Helping Someone in an Abusive Relationship

- Approach the person in an understanding, non-blaming way.
- Acknowledge that it is scary and difficult to talk about abuse; let the person know that they do not deserve to be treated this way and that they in no way caused the abuse.
- Support the person as a friend. Be a good listener and do not tell them what to do. Allow the person to make their own decisions, even if you do not agree with them. Avoid ultimatums that require them to end the relationship or lose your friendship. This only results in further isolating them and ultimately gives the abuser even more control.
- Consider that leaving an abusive relationship is often the most dangerous time for a victim. It is important to talk with an advocate about safety planning.
- Provide information about where to go for help (call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or TTY 1-800-787-3224).
- Let the person know that they are not alone.

Safety Planning

A safety plan is a tool that helps victims of domestic violence have a plan for what they can do if/when their abuser's violence escalates. Safety plans can be done confidentially, over the phone, 24 hours a day with a domestic violence advocate by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or TTY 1-800-787-3224.

National and Statewide Resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (voice), 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) 24-hour hotline that can assist victims of domestic violence with safety planning as well as link other community members to resources around the country.

Domestic Violence Agencies in Washington State

Each county in Washington state is served by at least one agency to assist victims of domestic violence. These organizations can provide shelter, a hotline, assistance with protection orders, help with safety planning, individual counseling, and support groups. Visit wscadv.org to find your local program or see Appendix B in this guide for a list of Washington state agencies by county.

The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence can provide local, state and national statistics on domestic violence. Interviews with Coalition staff can assist journalists in accurately reflecting the context of domestic violence crimes, local resources available for victims and abusers, and the opinions of experts in the field. Please contact Kelly Starr, Communications Coordinator, at 206-389-2515 ext. 210 or kelly@wscadv.org.

APPENDIX A

Domestic Violence Crimes Reported by Washington State Law Enforcement Agencies for the Year 2006¹

County	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Simple Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Motor Vehicle Theft	Arson	Protection Order Violations	County Totals
Adams	1	0	0	4	78	0	10	4	0	73	170
Asotin	0	0	0	15	154	1	0	0	0	31	201
Benton	3	9	0	62	666	8	4	1	0	153	906
Chelan	1	0	0	10	366	6	0	1	0	270	654
Clallam	0	7	1	32	393	14	10	3	0	115	575
Clark	3	33	9	210	1780	27	37	6	1	140	2246
Columbia	0	0	0	1	8	0	0	0	0	0	9
Cowlitz	2	0	2	53	747	5	0	0	0	245	1054
Douglas	1	0	0	18	136	3	0	0	0	31	189
Ferry	0	0	0	0	26	0	0	0	0	10	36
Franklin	1	6	2	32	375	3	5	1	0	142	567
Garfield	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	4	10
Grant	0	2	3	29	554	10	1	3	0	212	814
Grays Harbor	2	1	0	19	430	8	1	0	0	154	615
Island	0	1	0	7	200	0	1	0	1	37	247

County	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Simple Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Motor Vehicle Theft	Arson	Protection Order Violations	County Totals
Jefferson	0	1	3	6	142	3	2	0	0	31	188
King	8	83	63	1095	6863	241	311	19	20	2989	11692
Kitsap	2	19	1	158	1038	22	16	5	2	661	1924
Kittitas	0	0	0	1	165	3	0	1	0	64	234
Klickitat	0	0	0	11	102	0	0	0	0	15	128
Lewis	0	3	0	29	461	21	2	5	1	166	688
Lincoln	0	0	0	1	45	1	0	0	0	20	67
Mason	1	6	3	31	258	22	4	1	0	144	470
Okanogan	1	0	0	20	187	1	0	0	0	22	231
Pacific	0	0	0	12	171	0	0	0	0	22	205
Pend Oreille	1	0	0	2	62	0	0	0	0	4	69
Pierce	9	61	29	871	5889	261	239	72	0	2086	9517
San Juan	0	0	0	1	31	0	0	0	0	26	58
Skagit	0	3	5	39	638	19	4	2	2	304	1016
Skamania	0	2	0	2	93	0	0	0	1	27	125
Snohomish	3	23	8	226	2890	48	26	7	2	829	4062
Spokane	9	6	10	402	2337	47	35	7	0	1184	4037
Stevens	1	0	2	6	243	0	1	0	0	115	368

County	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Simple Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Motor Vehicle Theft	Arson	Protection Order Violations	County Totals
Thurston	3	4	5	153	1255	25	11	3	2	514	1975
Wahkiakum	0	0	0	5	21	0	0	0	0	2	28
Walla Walla	0	4	2	30	223	4	12	1	0	77	353
Whatcom	1	18	3	78	763	32	26	6	1	459	1387
Whitman	0	2	0	10	99	1	1	0	0	1	114
Yakima	3	10	7	106	1578	50	84	23	2	888	2751
Statewide Totals	56	304	158	3787	31473	886	843	171	35	12267	49980

¹ Information from *Crime in Washington State 2006*, published by the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs. Data is from 242 participating local law enforcement agencies statewide; 29 agencies did not provide reports.

APPENDIX B

Domestic Violence Direct Service Agencies in Washington State by County¹

Revised January 2008

Many counties in Washington state have a domestic violence task force or coalition that may also be a helpful source as you cover domestic violence-related stories. Your local direct service agency listed below can inform you of the existence of such a task force or coalition in your county and provide you with contact information.

Adams

New Hope Domestic Violence / Sexual Assault Services	(509) 764-8402 Crisis Line: (888) 560-6027
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Asotin

YWCA of Lewiston / Clarkston	(208) 743-1535 Crisis Line: (800) 669-3176
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Benton

Domestic Violence Services of Benton / Franklin Counties	(509) 366-6105, Ext. 116 Crisis Line: (800) 648-1277
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Chelan

Domestic and Sexual Violence Crisis Center	(509) 664-7446 Crisis Line: (509) 663-7446
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Clallam

Forks Abuse Program	(360) 374-6411 Crisis Line: (360) 374-2273
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Healthy Families of Clallam County	(360) 452-3811 Crisis Line: (360) 452-4357
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Clark

YWCA - SafeChoice	(360) 696-0167 Crisis Line: (800) 695-0167
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Columbia

YWCA – Walla Walla	(509) 525-2570 Crisis Line: (509) 529-9922
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Cowlitz

Emergency Support Shelter	(360) 425-1176 Crisis Line: (360) 636-8471
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Ferry

Connections	(509) 775-3331 Crisis Line: (800) 269-2380
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¹ This is a list of member programs of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Franklin

Domestic Violence Services of Benton / Franklin Counties (509) 366-6105, Ext. 116
Crisis Line: (800) 648-1277

Garfield

YWCA – Lewiston / Clarkston (208) 743-1535
Crisis Line: (800) 669-3176

Grant

New Hope Domestic Violence / Sexual Assault Services (509) 764-8402
Crisis Line: (888) 560-6027

Grays Harbor

Domestic Violence Center of Grays Harbor (360) 538-0733
Crisis Line: (800) 818-2194

Island

Citizens Against Domestic & Sexual Abuse (360) 678-9363
Crisis Line: (800) 215-5669

Jefferson

Domestic Violence / Sexual Assault Program of Jefferson County (360) 385-5291
Crisis Line: (360) 385-5291

King

Abused Deaf Women’s Advocacy Services (206) 726-0093 (TTY)
Crisis Line: (206) 236-3134 (TTY)

Alcohol / Drug Help Line – Domestic Violence Outreach Project (206) 722-3703
Crisis Line: (206) 722-3700

Asian & Pacific Islander Women & Family Safety Center (206) 467-9976

Solid Ground - Broadview Emergency Shelter (206) 299-2500
Crisis Line: (206) 299-2500

Consejo Counseling & Referral (206) 461-4880

Domestic Abuse Women’s Network (DAWN) (425) 656-4305
Crisis Line: (425) 656-7867

Eastside Domestic Violence Program (425) 562-8840
Crisis Line: (800) 827-8840

Giving Real Options to Women (GROW) (206) 257-0189

Jewish Family Service - Project DVORA (206) 461-3240
Crisis Line: (206) 461-3222

King (continued)

New Beginnings	(206) 783-4520 Crisis Line: (206) 522-9472
NW Immigrant Rights Project	(206) 587-4009
NW Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian & Gay Survivors of Abuse	(206) 568-7777
Refugee Women's Alliance	(206) 721-0243 Crisis Line: (206) 721-0243
Salvation Army Domestic Violence Programs	(206) 442-8379 Crisis Line: (206) 324-4943
Seattle Indian Health Board	(206) 324-9360
YWCA - Domestic Violence Services (South King County)	(425) 226-1266
YWCA - East Cherry	(206) 568-7843 Crisis Line: (206) 461-4436
YWCA – Seattle Emergency Shelter	(206) 461-4888
YWCA – Seattle / King County / Snohomish County	(206) 490-4353 Crisis Line: (206) 461-4882

Kitsap

YWCA - ALIVE Program	(360) 479-0522 Crisis Line: (800) 500-5513
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Kititas

ASPEN	(509) 925-9384
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Klickitat

Programs for Peaceful Living:	
• Goldendale Office	(509) 773-6100
• White Salmon Office	(509) 493-1533 Crisis Line: (800) 352-5541

Lewis

Families in Crisis	(360) 748-1081
Human Response Network	(360) 748-6601
White Pass Community Services Coalition	(360) 496-2322 Crisis Line: (360) 496-2322

Lincoln

Family Resource Center	(509) 725-4358 Crisis Line: (509) 725-4357
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Mason

South Puget Inter-Tribal Planning Agency	(360) 426-3990 Crisis Line: (360) 490-5713
Turning Pointe	(360) 426-1216 Crisis Line: (360) 432-1212

Okanogan

The Support Center	(509) 826-3221 Crisis Line: (888) 826-3221
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Pacific

Crisis Support Network	(360) 875-6702 Crisis Line: (800) 435-7276
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Pend Oreille

Family Crisis Network	(509) 447-2274 Crisis Line: (509) 447-5483
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Pierce

Crystal Judson Family Justice Center	(253) 798-4310
Korean Women's Association	(253) 535-4202
YWCA - Pierce County	(253) 272-4181 Crisis Line: (253) 383-2593

San Juan

Domestic Violence / Sexual Assault Services of the San Juan Islands:	(360) 468-3788
• Lopez Island Office	Crisis Line: (360) 468-4567 (360) 376-5979
• Orcas Island Office	Crisis Line: (360) 376-1234 (360) 378-8680
• San Juan Island Office	Crisis Line: (360) 378-2345

Skagit

Skagit Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services	(360) 336-9591 Crisis Line: (800) 726-6010
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Skamania

Skamania County Council on Domestic Violence / Sexual Assault	(509) 427-4210 Crisis Line: (877) 427-4210
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Snohomish

Snohomish County Center for Battered Women	(425) 259-2827 Crisis Line: (425) 252-2873
YWCA - Pathways for Women	(425) 258-2766
YWCA – Snohomish County	(425) 774-9843

Spokane

Polly's Place Ministries – Cookies Retreat Center (509) 624-6334
Crisis Line: (509) 624-6333

YWCA – Alternatives to Domestic Violence Program (509) 326-1190
Crisis Line: (509) 326-2255

Stevens

Family Support Center (509) 684-3796
Crisis Line: (509) 684-6139

Thurston

Safeplace (360) 786-8754
Crisis Line: (360) 754-6300

Partners in Prevention Education (360) 357-4472

Wahkiakum

Charlotte House (360) 795-6400
Crisis Line: (360) 795-6400

St. James Domestic Violence Advocacy Program (360) 795-8612
Crisis Line: (360) 795-6400

Walla Walla

YWCA - Walla Walla (509) 525-2570
Crisis Line: (509) 529-9922

Whatcom

Lummi Victims of Crime (360) 384-2285

Dorothy Place / Opportunity Council (360) 734-5121

Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services of Whatcom County (360) 671-5714
Crisis Line: (360) 715-1563

Womencare Shelter (360) 671-8539
Crisis Line: (877) 227-3360

Whitman

Alternatives to Violence of the Palouse (509) 332-0552
Crisis Line: (509) 332-4357

Yakima

Lower Valley Crisis Support Services (509) 837-6689
Crisis Line: (509) 837-6689

YWCA - Family Crisis Program (509) 248-7796
Crisis Line: (509) 248-7796