

# Safety Audits

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Justice's *Grant to Encourage Arrest Policies (GTEA)* funds were made available for the purpose of conducting *Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audits*. In 2006, the North Dakota Department of Health – Injury Prevention and Control Division received funding through the Department of Justice GTEA Program and contracted with the North Dakota Council on Abused Women's Services / Coalition Against Sexual Assault of North Dakota (NDCAWS/CASAND) to carry out the goals and objectives of the grant. This funding allowed NDCAWS/CASAND to, in turn, contract with four domestic violence programs within North Dakota. Each domestic violence program hired a Safety Assessment Coordinator to initiate, conduct, and implement a safety and accountability assessment in their community. The four sites selected in North Dakota were: (1) the SAFE Alternatives for Abused Families – Harvey site, (2) the Domestic Violence & Abuse Center, Inc. – Grafton site, (3) the Domestic Violence Crisis Center – Minot site, and (4) the Three Rivers Crisis Center – Wahpeton site.

The objective of the conducting the safety and accountability assessments has been to improve the coordination and communication among community agencies involved in responding to domestic violence cases, with the goal of promoting victim safety and maximizing offender accountability throughout the process. The goal of this process has been to link a multitude of agencies together in an effort to prevent victims from “falling through the cracks” and further, to end domestic violence. This “multitude of agencies” include: 911 dispatch, law enforcement, domestic violence victim advocacy service providers, prosecutors, social services, public health and the monitored exchange/visitation center.

Once each stakeholder was approached and their buy-in established, professionals from multi-disciplinary backgrounds in the community were recruited to participate in the assessment process. Each assessment site focused on 911 / dispatch, law enforcement, and advocacy response to domestic violence.

## *How a Safety Audit Works<sup>[1]</sup>*

A Safety Assessment is a *systematic observation and analysis of intra- and interagency routines and paper trails used in processing “cases” of domestic violence*. Lee, et al., related in an audit report:

*“Agencies often respond to domestic violence cases  
in ways that are fragmented, incident-based, cumbersome,*

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*slow, and often place the victim in an adversarial relationship to her abuser. Too often, this system leaves victims unprotected by the very agencies designed to protect them.”*

In accordance with the beliefs of a coordinated community response to domestic violence, a call to 911 typically represents the first of a number of steps taken by practitioners in the legal system. System workers from a multitude of agencies from federal, state, county, or city government, may act on one victim's case before it is closed. Each action taken is an opportunity to either enhance or somehow jeopardize that victim's safety. The purpose of the Safety Assessment is to improve the case processing to reflect the importance of victim safety and offender accountability. Lee, et al., also stated:

*“The purpose...is to see how, where, and if existing practices ensure the safety of victims and the accountability of offenders. Where these practices fail to consider these concerns, they can be redesigned.”*

The safety assessment does not test the staff members or administrators on their individual work performance, but rather provides a holistic examination of the processes that comprise the professional community's response to domestic violence. This examination involves how the actions of offenders and the information gathered by staff regarding these actions are recorded, distributed, analyzed, and used by others in the system.

The interviews and observations were organized by the Duluth Model to collect data addressing specific questions related to these issues:

- Rules and Regulations  
*How do laws, rules, and policies require or prohibit staff from accounting for victim safety?*
- Administrative Practices  
*Do forms, reports and worksheets used in domestic violence cases capture not only the context of the incident, but also the more complete context of the violent relationship?*
- Resources  
*How does the worker's access to technology or lack of resources affect victim safety and/or promote offender accountability?*
- Concepts and Theories  
*How are various concepts, theories, assumptions, philosophical frameworks embedded in the institutional response and how is the worker coordinated to use them?*

- Linkages  
*Is each worker linked to other workers in the criminal justice so that each has the information required to make decisions that promote victim safety and offender accountability?*
- Mission, Purpose, and Function  
*How does the interconnected mission, purpose, and functions of workers within a specific systems and institutions account for victim safety and offender accountability?*
- Accountability  
*How are the institutional practices of the agency organized to accomplish the three primary aspects of accountability (offender to victim, system to victim, practitioners to each other)?*
- Education and Training  
*What relevant training has this staff person received? What additional training would be helpful?*

The Safety Assessment combines several research methods utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. (1) Interviews with and observations of staff involve subjective, and often personal, *perspectives on how processes do or do not work in the context of victim safety*. These methods do however allow the interviewers/observers the opportunity to objectively map certain processes in detail; (2) Mapping involves the *identification of the exact chronology of “steps” that occur as a case is processed through the system*; and (3) Text analysis examines those *paper trails and is used to identify the frequency with which certain categories of information are included in institutional documents*.

Similar to that of other assessments, the Safety Assessment involves *participatory action* research, whereby the assessment teams themselves become catalysts for system-change. As the assessment teams identify, map and discuss various processes, team members may initiate or participate in system reforms in their individual agencies. Since the initiation of the project in December 2006, many system changes have been made simply because of the increased opportunity for communication between agencies.

<http://www.praxisinternational.org/index.asp?ID=2&MID=200>