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Author(s): Craig D. Uchida ; Carol A. Putnam ; Jennifer Mastrofski ; Shellie Solomon ; Deborah Dawson

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Dr. Craig D. Uchida
President

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Evaluating a Multi-Disciplinary Response to Domestic Violence: The DVERT Program in Colorado Springs

At-a-Glance

By

By Craig D. Uchida
Carol A. Putnam
Jennifer Mastrofski
Shellie Solomon
Deborah Dawson

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P.O. Box 12279
Silver Spring, MD 20908
(301) 438-3132
Fax: (301) 438-3134
Email: cduchida@aol.com

Website: www.e-21stCenturySolutions.com

Evaluating a Multi-Disciplinary Response to Domestic Violence: The DVERT Program in Colorado Springs

At-a-Glance

Purpose

This evaluation examines the Colorado Springs Police Department's Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team (DVERT), a multidisciplinary team comprised of criminal justice officials, non-profit organizations, victim advocates, and city and county human service agencies. DVERT takes on the most serious domestic violence cases in the greater Colorado Springs area.

The process evaluation, conducted by 21st Century Solutions, Inc. tracked cases from referral of domestic violence incidents through their adjudication or resolution. It also examined the nature of the collaboration that occurs within the team.

Research Issues and Questions

Funded through a grant from the National Institute of Justice, staff from 21st Century Solutions, Inc. examined a number of research and evaluation questions. Most importantly we asked the following: What are the activities of DVERT staff? Who are the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence? What are the characteristics of domestic violence-related incidents in Colorado Springs and surrounding jurisdictions? What is the nature of the intervention and prevention activities of the Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team? What are the effects of the intervention? What is the nature and extent of the collaboration among criminal justice agencies (the Colorado Springs Police Department, El Paso County Sheriff, District Attorney), victim advocates (Center for Prevention of Domestic Violence, Safehouse) and city and county human services agencies? What are the dynamics of the collaboration? How successful is the collaboration?

What was the Methodology?

To answer the research questions we collected data from the police department and DVERT case files and conducted interviews of key personnel and victims. As part of the researcher-practitioner partnership, research questions and analytic methods were jointly determined during the course of the project. We also observed the activities of DVERT staff, including home visits to abused victims, call-outs to the scene of on-going cases, and meetings and discussions about cases.

Background

The Colorado Springs Police Department (CSPD) has over 750 employees, including 528 sworn officers who are responsible for a population of over 350,000. About 40% of the officers respond to calls for service on a regular basis. For the last thirteen years Chief Lorne Kramer has led the department and has followed a community policing philosophy. CSPD's community policing approach includes community engagement, organizational adaptation and an emphasis on "total problem-oriented policing." Since 1996 CSPD has received federal funds to establish and institutionalize the Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team (DVERT). This unit, led by Detective Howard Black, involves a partnership and collaboration with the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (hereafter called the Center), a private, non-profit victim advocacy organization, and 25 other city and county agencies.

DVERT was first funded by a grant from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) in 1996. In the years that followed, the Violence Against Women Grant Office (VAWGO) and Victim Assistance and Law Enforcement (VALE) also supported the operation.¹

Collaborators

The DVERT program involves a partnership and collaboration with the Colorado Springs Police Department, the Center, a private, non-profit organization, and other city and county agencies, including:

- CASA of Colorado Springs
- Children's Advocacy Center
- City of Calhan Police Department
- City of Fountain Police Department
- City of Manitou Springs Police Department
- City of Monument Police Department
- City of Woodland Park Police Department
- Colorado Legal Services
- Colorado Springs School District 11
- COMCOR (Community Corrections)
- El Paso County Department of Health and the Environment
- El Paso County Department of Human Services (DHS)
- El Paso County Sheriff's Office
- Fort Carson Military Police
- Fort Carson Social Work Services
- Fourth Judicial District Attorney's Office
- Fourth Judicial District Probation Department
- Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region

¹ From these three sources DVERT has received almost \$3.2 million.

- Memorial Hospital
- Teller County Sheriff's Office
- Town of Green Mountain Falls Marshal's Office
- Town of Palmer Lake Marshal's Office
- University of Colorado at Colorado Springs
- United States Treasury Department, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms

Through its partnerships with these agencies, DVERT is able to provide a broad array of services to victims and their children.

DVERT Activities

DVERT is unlike any other domestic violence unit situated within a police agency. One of the major differences between DVERT and other police programs is its view that *the safety of the victim is the primary concern*. This philosophy drives the way in which advocates and law enforcement work with clients and how they work within the criminal justice system and social service system. This attitude is in contrast to other special units that are more concerned with an arrest and prosecution of the batterer. This also reflects the input of advocates at the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and other partner agencies.

Second, the program does not follow the traditional police model for a special unit. In most police agencies, a domestic violence unit serves as the coordinator for department activities. The traditional unit is usually comprised of police officers and a victim advocate, but the majority of people are from law enforcement. The traditional unit responds to serious domestic violence situations, serves as a referral unit for patrol (officers will transfer calls or incidents to the unit), and works with social service agencies in its jurisdiction (provide some training and information about police practices). The main focus of these special DV units is enforcing the law and bringing cases through the criminal justice system.

DVERT is different from the traditional model. It is a "systemic response" to domestic violence situations because it involves the coordination of criminal justice, social service, and community-based agencies. DVERT involves efforts to establish communication among criminal justice and social service agencies, to establish advocacy services to meet victims' needs, and to implement policies aimed toward more aggressive apprehension and sanctioning of offenders.

DVERT Cases

At the time of this evaluation (1998-2000) the DVERT program focused on three levels of domestic violence situations – Level I -- the most lethal situations where a victim may be in serious danger; Level II -- moderately lethal situations where the victim

is not in immediate danger; and Level III -- lower lethality situations where patrol officers engage in problem solving.²

A domestic violence situation comes to the attention of DVERT through a variety of mechanisms. Most of the referrals come from the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (the Center). Other referrals emanate from DHS, the Humane Society, other law enforcement agencies, or city service agencies. Once a case has been referred, all relevant information concerning criminal and prosecution histories, advocate, restraining orders, and human services documentation is researched by appropriate DVERT member agencies.

Referral decisions were made on a weekly basis. From May 1996 to December 1999, a DVERT "staffing unit" met to discuss individual domestic violence situations. A group of six to eight representatives from partner agencies listened to a description of a domestic violence event or series of events relating to one couple. At the weekly staffing meeting an advocate, police officer, or caseworker for children presented the case. Documentation and evidence is laid out, including criminal history, victim advocacy contacts, child protection contacts, humane society calls, calls for service, and other information. Discussion then occurs, followed by a vote of the panel to accept or reject the case. To maintain adequate coverage of clients, Level I cases were limited to 125 at any given time.³ Those cases that did not meet the Level I standards were placed in Levels II or III, or simply not recommended for acceptance for any level.

For the most serious cases or Level I cases, several things happen next. First, the staffing unit makes recommendations regarding immediate interventions by the various DVERT member agencies. Second, the addresses and names of victims and perpetrators are added to the Department's computer-aided dispatch system. Third, clients may be added to the 'Wants and Warrants' computer system with an indicator identifying them with DVERT. Once the client is in DVERT, ongoing intervention tactics may also occur, including counseling, advocacy, shelter, support, and legal services. At least once a week, a DVERT victim advocate will attempt to contact the victim to provide support, information, and resources. In some cases, cellular phones may be assigned to victims requiring immediate access to law enforcement and/or micro-cassette telephone recorders to document telephone harassment and violations of restraining orders. From its inception in May 1996 to December 31, 1999, DVERT accepted 421 Level I cases and 541 Level II cases. Offenders were predominantly white males between the age of 21 and 50. Victims were predominantly white females between the age of 16 and 50.

DVERT accepted cases for a variety of reasons -- in all we tabulated 19 possible reasons for accepting a referral.⁴ These reasons are consistent with the notion that the

² This categorization applies to DVERT cases from 1996 to 1999. In February 2000 DVERT made changes to its operation and no longer uses the Level I, II, or III designations. Instead, cases are now referred to as Assessment, Ongoing, or POP.

³ This was not always a rigid rule. If cases merited inclusion into DVERT Level 1, exceptions would be made to go beyond the 125 cases.

⁴ The options include: 1. multiple incidents of domestic violence; 2. injuries; 3. a prior offender arrest history; 4. children at risk; 5. general threats of violence; 6. specific threats to the victim; 7. threats to

primary concern was the safety of the victim. DVERT staff was concerned about the potential for lethality of the victim. The most frequent reason for acceptance was threats to the victim (76 percent), followed by evidence of multiple domestic violence incidents (66 percent of the cases). Reasons such as injuries, prior arrests of the offender, and physical abuse were indicated in over 70 percent of the cases. The least frequent reason for acceptance was elevation from Level II (2 percent of the cases) and recent losses in the victim's life (4 percent).

Intervention. DVERT advocates and police maintained close contact with clients. In 1999, advocates made 1,549 successful contacts with 263 Level I clients. A team (an advocate and officer) made an additional 355 contacts. Other professionals affiliated with DVERT made 1,031 contacts. This is an average of 11.2 contacts per client over a one-year period. This equates to about 1 contact every five weeks for each client. Most case files are filled with notes and descriptions of contacts attempted and made by DVERT advocates. In our interviews with 19 victims, they reported a range of contacts from 1 contact per month to nearly 300 contacts over 12 months. This disparity can be explained by the nature of the relationship between the victim and DVERT. A number of victims initiated contact with their advocates, while others remained passive and waited to hear from their advocates. Others did not return phone calls made by advocates or police officers and were difficult to find.

Role of advocates. Advocates assisted victims in a number of ways. They referred clients and their children to group or individual counseling at the Center. They assisted them with day-to-day basic needs – finding housing, hooking up a telephone, calling the utility companies, getting welfare assistance, etc. They could provide cellular phones to victims who were being stalked so they could call 911 immediately. They were good “listeners” and counselors to victims who were facing the criminal justice system for the first time. They joined the victim in court to provide moral support and perhaps to testify against the batterer.

Criminal justice system. Other interventions occurred through the enforcement of restraining orders or arrests for a variety of crimes, including assault, kidnapping, attempted murder, sexual assault, menacing, or stalking. In 1999, DVERT police officers made 47 felony arrests and 85 misdemeanor arrests. The District Attorney filed over 50 cases in 1999 resulting in five jury trials, 14 guilty verdicts (or plea bargains), and 7 not guilty counts. A number of cases were still pending in 2000.

Closing Cases. During the first four years of DVERT's existence, 285 cases were closed. Fifty-one percent of the cases (144 of 285) were deactivated mainly due to physical separation of the victim and offender. In five (2 percent) of the cases, either the victim or the offender was deceased. Of the physical separation cases, 33 percent were due to the victim and/or offender moving out of the area. Twenty percent (58 of 285) of

children; 8. threats to animals; 9. threats to others; 10. access to weapons; 11. evidence of stalking behaviors; 12. the lethality level was high; 13. a restraining order had been violated; 14. evidence of physical abuse; 15. evidence of sexual abuse; 16. offender had a prior criminal history; 17. recent losses to the victim; 18. case was being elevated from Level II; and 19. other reasons

the cases were deactivated because the offender was incarcerated (there was only one report of the *victim* being in jail).

In 60 cases (21 percent), the main reason for deactivation had to do with an offender *exhibiting positive behavior*. This is an important finding for it demonstrates a peaceful resolution to the domestic violence problem. No contact with the victim without any other positive behavior was indicated in 51 of the 60 cases. In seven cases, other positive behavior such as serving time and no reported re-offending was cited along with no contact. For the seven cases where the offender was still in contact with the offender, the offender was either in treatment, had completed a domestic violence program, or had served time and has had no reported incidents.

For 12 cases (6 percent), the main reason for deactivation was the victim did not want to partner with DVERT. The victim could not be reached, wanted no contact with DVERT, or indicated that s/he was unwilling or would not cooperate with DVERT.

Perceptions and Attitudes of DVERT Staff

To assist us in understanding the implementation and impact of DVERT, we interviewed a number of current and former DVERT staff. This section describes the results of those interviews.

Impact of DVERT. Interviewees described several major accomplishments of their affiliated agencies as a result of DVERT. Respondents from victim services focused on three major categories of change: services for victims, inter-agency relationships, and organizational accomplishments. All three of these areas improved because of DVERT. For law-enforcement personnel they saw changes in awareness of domestic violence by police officers, improved education and training for police; and improvements in networking and communication among county and city agencies. Interviewees from DHS indicated that linking domestic violence situations to child welfare was a major accomplishment, as are organizational changes associated with DVERT. That is, the direct involvement of children's services for domestic violence households was viewed as a vast improvement in the system. Those affiliated with the District Attorney's office identified tougher plea bargaining, education, effective prosecution, and resource availability.

Services to women. The majority of persons interviewed believed that services to women improved as a result of DVERT. They cited improvements through agency collaboration, training, the women themselves, and new programs and initiatives. Of these categories, most interviewees were impressed that the women involved in domestic violence were assisted and changed by DVERT. They mentioned cell phone distribution, safe housing, and counseling as some of the ways in which services have improved. Challenges to serving victims include feelings of being overwhelmed by the task at hand or personnel issues, such as low pay for victims' advocates.

Barriers to improving services were identified by about one-third of interviewees. They include housing needs, limited resources, and potential for the process to re-victimize some women.

Changes in law enforcement. Most respondents felt that practices in law enforcement changed as a result of DVERT. Categories of change included education and training, organizational changes, inter-agency relationships, direct services and resources. One major change is Fast Track, a new program designed by the district attorney that expedites domestic violence cases that come to the attention of the criminal justice system.

Interviewees said that the rotation of officers through DVERT has a ripple effect on changing law enforcement. Not only do rotations dramatically change the perspective and knowledge of officers directly involved in a rotation, but the experiences of rotating officers filter back to home departments when rotations have ended. Other examples of changes in law enforcement include better understanding and enforcement of the law with mandatory arrest (along with relevant issues, such as stalking, dual arrests, and primary aggressors), needs in rural areas, and sensitivity to the subject of domestic violence. A few interviewees described challenges to change within law enforcement with focused on the slowness of institutional change compared to individual change.

Violence Reduction. The most prominent message conveyed by DVERT staff is that violence is reduced for women when they become a part of the DVERT caseload and are being served and supported by DVERT staff. Further, when perpetrators are in the DVERT caseload, and are being monitored by DVERT staff, recidivism for those perpetrators – as one means of measuring reduction of violence – is lowered or non-existent.

Interviewees also said that violence has been reduced for children as a result of DVERT. In particular, children are safer when their mothers are actively involved within DVERT's caseload due to a number of variables, such as increased vigilance of those children, and programs and resources for those children.

Respondents are realistic in identifying challenges to reducing violence. Almost half of them suggest that some educational pieces are missing (school programming for adolescents, for example); DVERT's limitations on impact reduction; the nature of the community with its transient population and value system poses challenges; and that there are questions about identifying persons appropriate for intervention.

On Collaboration

Role differentiation. Interviewees described three levels of collaborations among partners: 1) those among core partner-agency staff housed at DVERT; 2) those among staff of partner agencies who are split in their physical location (at DVERT and partner agency offices); and 3) those among partner agencies at large. Across the board,

the majority of interviewees feel strongly that role differentiation is generally clear. At the same time, the majority also believe that there are conflicts associated with role differentiation. Conflicts stem from a variety of sources, which include intermittent misunderstanding about differentiating roles; sharing common goals with different agency policies to achieve those goals; lack of knowledge about partner agencies' policies/regulations and constraints; and conflicts over information sharing.

Conflict. The majority of interviewees believe that there are also conflicts outside of role differentiation. However, many respondents emphasize the positive aspects of conflict as well. One person interjected that conflict "speaks for the process" of inter-agency collaboration; another suggested that conflict translates into "healthy debates". Areas of conflict extend to turf and jurisdiction; definitional issues; decision-making; power/control within DVERT, establishment of in-house disciplinary policies; and some levels of distrust.

Victim Interviews

In April 2000 we conducted interviews with 19 DVERT clients.⁵ We asked a number of questions about their experiences with DVERT, law enforcement, victim service agencies, and the criminal justice process as well as specific questions about their particular situations.

Eighteen women and one man were interviewed by staff of 21st Century Solutions. On average, these clients spent over one year in the DVERT program. Six clients were still part of DVERT; 13 had been "deactivated." During their time in DVERT, clients reported that they were in contact with an advocate or law enforcement officer on a regular basis. For five individuals this meant contact twice a week. For five other individuals it meant weekly contact. Only two clients said that contact was "not often." We also asked victims about the number of contacts they actually had with DVERT. One individual who was in the program for about a year said that she had almost 300 contacts with an advocate. This number was an exception as the average for the rest of the respondents was about 36 contacts per client with an advocate.

Most respondents had a very high regard for DVERT and its staff. Seventeen of 19 clients strongly agreed or agreed that a DVERT advocate was available to the victim whenever she was needed. The same number strongly agreed or agreed that DVERT staff provided support to the victim. Fourteen strongly agreed or agreed that DVERT police officers understood their problems and concerns. Sixteen respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the DVERT program "made me feel safe." Two clients were not happy about being in the DVERT program. They felt that their lives were interfered with by advocates and police and did not appreciate the interventions.

⁵ These individuals were selected by DVERT staff members based on availability. It is not representative sample of all clients, but the information provides us with insights about their views of DVERT and domestic violence.

We asked open-ended questions at the conclusion of the interview. When asked to "tell us about your experiences in DVERT" more than half (10) had high praise for DVERT. One victim said that DVERT "saved my life." Another said that: "DVERT is a great program...without the advocate, I would not have gotten a restraining order ... having an advocate in court was very valuable ... otherwise wouldn't have followed through on charges ... I would probably be 6 feet under right now..." Finally, one respondent said, "I really thank God for DVERT, they pulled me through...I'm much more stable now... DVERT helped me get help for my alcoholism and I have not drunk for a year."

Victims also were asked a series of questions about domestic violence as it affected them. Fifteen victims did not stay with their partner when they were in the DVERT program. Thirteen said that there were times when they wanted to call the police because they were afraid of possible violence. Of these, nine victims said they called the police; the other four said they wanted to but did not. For the nine who called the police, three victims called the police on three separate occasions, three others called the police four times, two said they called five times, and one called the police about 20 times.

Key Findings of the Evaluation

Overall, this evaluation identified 16 significant findings that should be beneficial to practitioners and others interested in reducing domestic violence. In summary, these findings are:

The Philosophy and Characteristics of DVERT

1. DVERT focuses on the *safety of victims* as its primary concern. This principle guides the multi-disciplinary team in dealing with the criminal justice and social service systems. By placing the safety of victims at the forefront, and by asking themselves "how does this action affect the victim?" members of DVERT staff are confident in their abilities to deal with difficult situations.
2. DVERT does not follow the traditional model of domestic violence special units in police departments. It is a multi-disciplinary response to the problem of domestic violence incorporating criminal justice and social service agencies.
3. DVERT takes a more balanced approach to the problems of domestic violence as it spreads responsibility for the problem to a number of agencies, not just the police.

DVERT Activities and Results

4. DVERT has handled nearly 1000 of the most serious domestic violence cases (Level I and II) in the Colorado Springs area over the last four years.
5. Characteristics of offenders/perpetrators in the DVERT caseload were predominantly white males between the ages of 31 and 40.
6. Victims in the DVERT caseload were predominantly white females between the ages of 21 and 40.
7. Level I cases were brought to the attention of DVERT primarily through the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and not through the "normal" channels of arrests or calls for services.
8. For cases opened in 1996 the average time to closure was 530 days; for cases opened in 1998 closures occurred within 210 days, a decrease of 60%.
9. "Risk to children" was the most frequent reason for acceptance into the DVERT caseload in 1998, representing a philosophical shift towards greater concern for children.
10. As DVERT expertise has grown, staff refined the criteria used for accepting cases.

Impact of DVERT on victims

11. Victims have more resources through DVERT. Safe housing, counseling, and explanations of the criminal justice process are among the resources available to victims.
12. Of 19 victims who were interviewed, two said that DVERT had saved their lives. Others said that DVERT changed their lives for the better.
13. For women and children actively involved in the DVERT program, it appears that violence has been reduced.
14. Law enforcement practices have changed as a result of DVERT. Police officers are more aware of domestic violence issues in Colorado Springs; they receive more training in domestic violence (on stalking, dual arrests, and primary aggressor); and they have engaged in more problem solving than in the past.

Impact on Services

15. Services to victims have improved as a result of DVERT. Because of the collaboration among police and social service agencies, the most serious domestic violence cases are now being addressed. Advocates, police, caseworkers for children, the district attorney, and other agencies work together to ensure the safety of victims.

16. Overall, through this program CSPD has expanded its domestic violence operation with one detective and rotating patrol officers paid through overtime to a fully functional multi-disciplinary organization. It has saved lives, reduced violence, improved communication among city and county agencies and service providers, and improved the quality of life in Colorado Springs.

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National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)
Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000