

Highlights of Recommendations from Survivors:

Do's

- Ask questions which help the readers understand domestic violence.
- Educate people about what they can do to stop domestic violence.
- Explain why batterers batter.
- Explain dangers in leaving and why people stay.
- Interview survivors and describe the process of becoming a survivor.
- Pay attention to language; word questions so they are not judgmental.
- Consider the safety of the person being interviewed.
- Be careful to not reveal locations and personal details.
- Protect children's privacy.
- Know the difference between news business and triggering trauma.
- Screen sources because of the taboo of speaking ill of the dead.
- Correct errors.
- Respect the victim's family.

Don'ts

- Don't focus on the gore.
- Don't push for more revelation than survivors want to give.
- Don't assume certain cultures or classes are violent.
- Don't treat survivors like victims.

Questions to Ask When Interviewing Survivors

What made it hard for you to leave? (rather than why did you stay?)

What advice would you give someone in a situation similar to the one you were in?

If a woman is not ready to leave, what should she do to get ready?

Whom did you call for help, where did you find help, or did anyone try to help you?
(rather than why didn't you call for help?)

Were the police involved in your case; and if not, could the police have helped you?
(rather than why didn't you call the police?)

Delaware Best Media Practice: Tips for Journalists

Place the crime within the context of domestic violence.

- Domestic violence homicides contain elements much different than other types of homicides and it is important to explain that. Interview domestic violence experts who can explain how homicide is an extreme measure for the abuser to exert power and control over their partner.

Media Practice

“The fact that L. C. strangled his wife and later killed himself is the ultimate use of power and control over her life, if he cannot have her, no one else will.” (*The News Journal*, 8/11/05)

- Ask police if homicide will be considered domestic violence. If it is not, explain why.

Media Practice

“Mr. Wynn and Ms. Suthard ‘just broke up a couple of months ago,’ Cpl. Oldham said... ‘It was a domestic-violence incident...’” (*Delaware State News*, 5/8/05) *Robert Wynn killed his ex-fiancé, Lisa Suthard and her boyfriend Frank Cannatelli.*

- Use statistics available from domestic violence experts or advocates in order to place the homicide in the broader context of the crime.

Media Practice

“While police said many of this year’s killings have been random or linked to the drug trade, at least eight have been related to domestic violence, a figure that alarms advocates... Ron Keen, executive director of the state Domestic Violence Coordinating Council, said Delaware averaged 12 such deaths annually from 2002 to 2004, but his figures also include some suicides stemming from domestic altercations.” (*The News Journal*, 7/7/05)

- Use the term “domestic violence” in describing these homicides.

Media Practice

“Already this year, the number of domestic violence killings is more than double last year’s total. The most recent was the death of Malinda Carter, 33 year-old Pike Creek woman strangled by her husband Saturday.” (*The News Journal*, 8/11/05)

Recognize that domestic violence is not a private matter.

- Domestic violence does not just affect the couple involved. It affects safety in the workplace and neighborhood, impacts our children and literally costs our society millions in medical costs and lowered economic productivity. It’s important to acknowledge that it *is* a public issue.

Media Practice

“‘The little girl is the one that loses,’ he said. ‘She doesn’t have a mother or a father now.’” (West case, *The News Journal*, 10/16/05).

- Include resources that are available for victims, such as hotline numbers and support groups and batterers as well, such as where to find a batterers intervention group.

Media Practice

“See a list of phone numbers for counseling and assistance at www.delawareonline.com. For information on obtaining Protection From Abuse orders, log onto www.delaware.gov. Click on More State Agencies, Courts and then Family Court.” (*The News Journal*, 8/11/05)

- Often, the homicide is portrayed as unpreventable. This is not true. Include ways in which community members can help (i.e. advocacy and training events, seminars).

Media Practice

“These are horrible tragedies, but we also need to see them as teaching moments’, said Carol Post, executive director of the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence. ‘We have to remain in the public eye talking about these issues to ensure everyone in the community develops a zero tolerance for domestic violence.’” (*The News Journal*, 8/11/05)

“‘If someone is being abused, if you are aware that it’s happening to your loved or neighbor, don’t ignore it,’ Post said. ‘Call police. Try and get some help.’” (*The News Journal*, 8/11/05)

Let the story evolve.

- Domestic violence homicides aren't just private tragedies nor are they unpredictable. Many times there was a history of abuse and violence.

Media Practice

"But beneath her bubbly exterior, many knew that Ms. Suthard suffered much pain and turmoil as the result of ex-fiancé Robert L. Wynn's violent temper. Mr. Suthard said his daughter was 'very scared' of Mr. Wynn, and had previously tried to get him to take anger management classes."

(Delaware State News, 5/10/05)

- Hearing that a fellow neighbor, co-worker or family member has been killed, or is accused of killing another, can be devastating. Many people are indeed shocked to learn this news, even if they were aware of abuse or warning signs of abuse. Thus, allow time for the shock to subside to ask sources if there was a history of abuse.
- Look for patterns of controlling behavior or a history of violence by searching for court documents such as protection, no contact, or anti-harassment orders or other criminal offenses. Talking to police can also help in this search.

Media Practice

"No protection from abuse orders were taken out in Family Court, either by Suthard or Wynn, court officials said. But there had been signs of a possible problem, including a December police report Suthard filed after a domestic dispute with Wynn." *(The News Journal, 5/10/05)*

"In the past 15 years, Cole has faced a string of criminal charges in Delaware Superior Court, Court of Common Pleas, and Family Court." *(The News Journal, 3/9/05)*

Illustrate the warning signs of domestic violence.

- Sources may be unaware of warning signs so it is important to ask specific questions such as: Was the perpetrator a jealous person? Did they become involved very quickly? Did the victim ever explain away injuries such as bruises, other marks, black eyes, broken bones etc, that didn't quite match with her story? Did the victim seem withdrawn, depressed, or even paranoid and jumpy? If the victim ended the relationship, how did the perpetrator react to this news?

Media Practice

"I've known her since I was young," said Page Melson, who lives two doors from Suthard's home. "I talked to her a couple of times, but she rarely came over. They said she had a jealous boyfriend." *(The News Journal, 5/8/05)*

- One way of exerting power and control over a partner is by isolating them from the outside world. Ask questions such as: Was the perpetrator a controlling person? How did the perpetrator feel about his partner working? Was the victim allowed to see family and friends? How did the perpetrator act around family and friends? Did the perpetrator drop by the victim's workplace frequently? Was the victim able to see friends, family or co-workers without the perpetrator?

Media Practice:

“In the weeks leading up to her death, Malinda Carter talked about leaving her ailing husband, a friend said. ‘I told her months and months ago to leave him,’ said Michelle Swift, of Pike Creek. ‘He was a very controlling person, and I worried for her safety.’” (*The News Journal*, 8/9/05).

Identify other common questions and misconceptions about the dynamics of domestic violence.

- Many people wonder, “Why doesn't she just leave?” By asking this question, it places blame on the victim, who has not broken the law by being in an abusive relationship. A better way to explain this is by explaining the many obstacles to leaving an abusive relationship.

Media Practice

“Swift said she last spoke with Malinda Carter on Thursday. ‘She said she wasn't happy in the relationship but was in no position to leave him because of his medical condition.’” (*The News Journal*, 8/9/05).

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

Media Practice

“From reports, Malinda Carter had recently informed her husband of her intentions to leave him...” (*The News Journal*, 8/11/05) *Her husband killed her, and then took his own life.*

- Always consider confidentiality issues when interviewing survivors of domestic violence. Ask if using a different name or omitting a last name would ensure their safety.

Use sources judiciously and with caution.

Family and friends of the perpetrator, especially if he has committed suicide, will often try to explain the perpetrator's behavior, hide and deny abuse occurred in the past, and describe him as being incapable of doing such a thing.

Police will provide facts about the homicide itself, but may omit contextual information.

Some neighbors, co-workers and acquaintances may have not known the couple well enough to accurately establish whether or not there was a history of abuse. Just because they were unaware, does not mean that one did not exist. Batterers become adept at isolating their partners and only using abuse in private, which may explain why many sources claim that the couple kept to themselves.