



ICADV MEDIA TOOLKIT

QUICK TIPS UPDATED: 10 JAN 2012

Mission

The Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence seeks to engage all people in a movement to change the social and political systems that perpetuate violence against women. We do this through education, advocacy and quality victim services.

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QUICK TIPS FOR COVERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic Violence is an epidemic affecting individuals in every community, regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, nationality or educational background. It is often accompanied by emotionally abusive and controlling behavior, and thus is part of a systematic pattern of dominance and control. Domestic violence results in physical injury, psychological trauma, and sometimes death. The consequences of domestic violence can cross generations and truly last a lifetime. Fear, grief, and shame can create difficult barriers when trying to shed light on a domestic violence story. How can reporters tell the story and break the silence that has historically surrounded this issue?

1. Find out what the relationship was between the perpetrator and the victim(s).

Ask the police and/or prosecutor what the relationship was between the perpetrator and victim(s) and whether the crime fits the definition of domestic violence under [Iowa's Code 708.2A](#).

If the alleged perpetrator committed suicide and there is no one to charge, ask the police or district attorney whether they would have treated this as a domestic violence crime if the perpetrator were alive.

Why the relationship matters: In Iowa, dating relationships are not protected under the same laws as domestic violence. If the relationship between the perpetrator and victim do not meet the criteria for domestic violence, there is often an opportunity to make the case for why dating relationships need the same protections.

Keep in mind: There may have been no protective order or no public or official record of abuse. A prior documented history of domestic violence is not necessary for there to be a violation of the domestic violence law. It could be the first violation; it could be the 100th.

2. Search for patterns of violence and control and let the story evolve.

Domestic violence can be explained. Batterers follow clear patterns and often use similar control tactics. Speak to domestic violence experts about the behaviors of batterers to explain to the audience the predictable actions. Look for warning signs, a pattern of control, intimidation, and/or violence. Was there a previous police intervention? Restraining order? Were there guns in the house?

Try to avoid sensational stories quoting family and neighbors expressing “shock that anything like this could happen” or “what a good person the perpetrator is/was.” Be aware of how source selection twists the story’s angle. Understand that grieving families will put the perpetrator in the best light, especially if s/he dies, and that people are loathe to speak ill of the dead.

Ask police about whether the crime matches the legal definition of domestic violence. If the crime was not charged under the domestic violence statute, ask, “why not?” If the crime was a domestic violence crime, search for patterns of control – set the context for the violence. Don’t treat domestic violence homicide as an unexplainable, unpredictable tragedy.

Why patterns of violence and control matter: Too often people are “surprised” when a domestic violence murder occurs. In fact, murder is the ultimate form of domestic violence...it is often the last in a line of abuses.

Keep in mind: The pattern of violence and control does not need to span significant lengths of time. The break-up may in fact be when the abuse becomes evident to outsiders. We know that the most dangerous time for victims is when leaving an abuser. Separated and divorced women are most at risk, especially in the first two months after leaving their abusive partners.

3. Call domestic violence experts from the beginning.

Experts can put the crime in context. Include interviews with local experts to explain the crime as one way the abuser attempted to maintain power and control over their partner. Use the term “domestic violence murder” when reporting on homicides between intimate partners: this terminology sets the context for the crime.

Talk to domestic violence experts to provide information about patterns of abuse, the definition of domestic violence, warning signs, and solutions. Ask other experts, such as family violence researchers, to speak on the broader impact of domestic violence and how it affects our culture.

Why experts matter: To have a firm understanding of the issue and to ensure the accuracy of information, it is imperative to include interviews from domestic violence experts. The information on domestic violence will be viewed as reputable and you will be recognized for responsible reporting.

Keep in mind: Active domestic violence cases can often pose difficulties when reporting stories. Experts can talk about domestic violence in generalities, but cannot comment on a specific active case. The assumptions can affect not only the community’s view of the situation, but has the potential to negatively impact the case and/or victim.

4. Pay attention to language.

Use the words “domestic violence.” While it may seem redundant to say “domestic violence” when you are speaking about violence between intimates, it is important to state because it sets the context for the crime. If the perpetrator is alive and has been charged, but has not admitted guilt, use “alleged domestic violence murder.”

Refrain from using minimizing words like “dispute,” “quarrel,” or “spat,” which detract from the violent and criminal nature of the behavior.

Craft statements about the victim so that they don’t make a judgment. For example, rather than asking, “why did she stay,” which implies she is to blame for the abuse, ask “what were the barriers she faced in leaving her abusive relationship?”

Why is language so important: It is important to use the right language to report domestic violence stories because it puts the onus on the abuser and stops blaming the victim for the violence perpetrated against her. The more we can get the community to recognize the issue for what it is, the more domestic violence will be brought to light as a community issue and not dismissed as a private matter.

Keep in mind: If you have interviewed the victim, be extra careful about the language you use. Even the way you frame your questions can re-traumatize her. As well, be sensitive to issues of victim safety. Don’t report information that will put the victim or her children in danger. i.e. her current location.