

Plan helps prevent domestic violence

by Elvin Klassen



Threat assessment and risk management are essential skills all police officers require to deal with today's increasingly complex and sophisticated cases.

"It is important that officers have a plan – 'winging it' just is not good enough," says Sgt. Keith Hammond of the Vancouver Police Department's (VPD) Domestic Violence and Criminal Harassment Unit (DVCHU).

Hammond is specially trained in threat violence and recommends using HCR-20, which outlines clear and concise steps in analyzing an offence and the offender. Each of 20 items relating to historical, clinical and risk management is scored, including previous violence, relationship instability, psychopathy, prior supervision failure, lack of insight, negative attitudes, impulsivity and unresponsiveness to treatment, lack of personal support and non-compliance with remediation attempts.

"Police are able to make good observations but often have difficulty reporting it to the agencies," says Hammond. "With this tool the officers have a track to run on as they look at the offence and focus on the future of the offender and the victim. It assists the officer to broaden the scope of the investigation. It gives him a detailed interview strategy that is thorough and it allows him to present the information in a concise, clear manner. It makes it possible to make recommendations on how this person should be managed over the long term."

Reporting using HCR-20 has been well received by the courts, Hammond says. "It is comprehensive and complete. It helps the investigator to move away from cop jargon and speak the same common language."



Detective Joseph Daniel, Sgt. Keith Hammond and Det. Keith Dormond.

Officers simply gather information for the court in an organized manner, he empathizes. "In the absence of having a plan, people were using their own limited experience and previous background. This plan has been well researched and documented. It evaluates the risk and sets up a plan for action."

The VPD has also focused on preventing workplace violence. An analysis of one worker about to be fired, using HCR-20, revealed difficult past problems and possible future risk. By working with the employer, who agreed to pay for counseling, the situation was diffused.

Detectives also develop plans and advise employers. They may be present during dismissals or recommend a private security agency be hired to assist. Employees are supported and steps are taken to avoid embarrassment and possible risk to the workplace. Many dangerous situations are diffused with company support through threat assessment and risk management.

The VPD also uses this plan effectively in assessing domestic violence and stalking threats and managing risk. Unit detectives Joseph Daniel and Keith Dormond both indicate that using the plan improves their analysis of offences and reporting procedures.

Vancouver's DVCHU receives more than 4,000 referrals each year through its PRIME database, which provides information about offenders and case details, making it easier to prioritize them. Since it can only process five percent of these due to staffing limitations, it's important to choose the most critical cases.

This unit also trains patrol officers on threat assessment and risk management and has received a lot of interest from outside BC. This led to a course for other agencies, which was quickly over subscribed. Sixty officers from law enforcement agencies across Canada, the US and as far away as Italy participated.

In a similar course set for Feb. 20 to March 1, 2006 in Vancouver participants will study:

- two basic approaches to threat assessment and how to use them in dealing with general and targeted violence;
- the role of mental disorders in violence;
- the link between threat assessment and threat management;
- threat assessment and management applied to specific cases, including sexual, stalking, domestic, school, workplace and group violence.

The focus is on job relevant skills and studying participants' own cases. Simon Fraser University psychology professors Dr. Stephen Hart and Dr. P. Randall Kropp, who are widely published and recognized, will act as trainers.

"Violence risk assessment, also known as threat assessment or threat management, has become a standard tool in law enforcement," says Hart. "In the past, threat assessment was viewed as a 'special skill' used by officers working in behavioural sciences, organized crime or protection of public figures."

These days it's a "fundamental skill for any police officer who works with violent offences and offenders," he notes.

Past participants dealt with a wide range of problems and issues, he says. "Regardless of their area of specialization, police officers need to be able to understand the risks posed by offenders, the strategies that could be used to manage or contain those risks and how to communicate effectively about risk when writing reports or testifying in court."

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