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Virginia Beach to Establish Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team

Virginia Beach, Virginia--Virginia Beach City Council passed a resolution Tuesday night to establish a team of representatives from various City and private agencies who will work together to examine specific cases of domestic violence homicide with the goal of improving the coordinated community response to victims, particularly those identified as high-risk cases.

The core team is co-chaired by Samaritan House and the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney and includes representatives from Virginia Beach Police Department, State Medical Examiner's Office, Virginia Beach Department of Human Services Mental Health Division, Virginia Beach Department of Human Services Child Protective Services Division, Virginia Beach Community Corrections and Pretrial, Virginia Beach Office of the Magistrate, Virginia Beach Victim-Witness Office, Fleet & Family Support Services, and CHKD Child Abuse Prevention Program.

Closed cases will be submitted for review by team members but will remain confidential outside of case review. Reviews will entail deep exploration of the life and death of the parties involved, including the points of contact each had with various systems. The goals of fatality review are not to assign blame or determine responsibility for missed opportunities for intervention but to strengthen existing communications, develop greater collaboration among agencies, and offer recommendations for overall improvement in system response.

In 2013, the Virginia Beach Coordinated Community Response Team (CCRT) endorsed the formation of a fatality review team. CCRT, which meets every other month at Samaritan House, includes members from multiple agencies working in response to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

Recommendations derived from fatality case reviews will be presented to CCRT and City Council members, and a collaborative effort will result increased protection for victims.

Domestic violence homicides account for 30% of homicides statewide. During the 10-year period of 2003-2012, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner reports that there were 21 such homicides and 10 domestic violence associated homicides in Virginia Beach. These deaths accounted for 15.3% of all homicides in the city during the same time period, and 3.3% of domestic violence homicides in the state of Virginia. About half (51.6%) of cases had at least one identifiable factor that was known to precipitate the fatal violence.

“Fatality Review is the essence of prevention. It is about going back to look at what went wrong so that we can make changes to prevent the worst case scenario from happening again,” says Larissa Sutherland, Samaritan House education & outreach coordinator who also facilitates the city’s CCRT and will facilitate the fatality review team. “We have a really dedicated group of people who have spent a year not only building a review team but also strengthening the relationships that will make our team successful. The goal we’re all behind is to keep people alive.”

Patrick Connolly, lead prosecutor of cases before Virginia Beach Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, will represent the Office of the Commonwealth’s Attorney. He hopes to work with Virginia Beach police and Victim-Witness to select cases for review starting at the beginning of the year.

Samaritan House is Hampton Roads’ trusted domestic violence resource offering services to stop violence with education and training, safety planning and court assistance; and services to heal violence with counseling, support groups, children’s programs and more. Samaritan House has been serving the community since 1984.

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