

Officer-Involved Domestic Violence (OIDV) Ensuring Accountability



POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM

Ujima
The National Center on Violence
Against Women in the Black Community

Creating legitimacy and ensuring public trust begin with holding our own professionals accountable and enforcing clear policies to address OIDV. Strong policies demonstrate an agency's commitment to taking domestic violence seriously—regardless of the offender's role or position. Clear policies not only guide appropriate responses but also ensure that all parties involved receive protection, access to services, and due process while strengthening trust between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

Tip 1

Establish a comprehensive, stand-alone OIDV policy. A dedicated, stand-alone policy signals that an agency understands and recognizes that OIDV presents specific challenges requiring additional considerations not present in other domestic or relationship-violence cases. An OIDV policy should clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of officers, supervisors, investigators, and command staff when a law enforcement officer is involved in a domestic violence incident. A comprehensive OIDV policy should also outline training requirements, preventive measures such as early intervention and nonpunitive family services, and concurrent criminal and internal investigations. A clear, transparent policy can reassure the community that the agency does not conceal misconduct and that there is a plan in place to address such incidents if they occur. Good policy is a core element in creating a culture that is fearless in addressing OIDV.

Tip 2

Require mandatory, timely reporting of incidents. Like all other crimes, each domestic violence incident involving an officer must be promptly and formally documented. Mandatory incident reporting promotes information sharing and victim protection while helping to preserve evidence. This policy can also help ease community concerns that officers will receive preferential treatment from the criminal justice system by demonstrating and documenting that their cases are processed in a manner consistent with established agency policies for handling all crime reports.

If the involved officer is employed by a different agency than the responding officers, notification should be made to the involved officer's agency as soon as is safely possible.

Tip 3

Immediately request supervisor response and secure the scene. As with any domestic violence report, responding officers should address the involved parties' immediate safety, including securing the scene, offering medical assistance, and separating the parties. When the incident involves a law enforcement officer as an involved party, responding officers should also immediately request a supervisor's response to the scene. A power imbalance is often the first issue that arises in OIDV responses, either because of the culture of policing or because of the tenure or rank of the subject involved. Policy and practice should address this issue early and mitigate the impact by requiring that a supervisor of higher rank than the officer involved respond to the scene, regardless of whether the subject officer is employed by the same agency.

Separating the parties helps to physically secure the scene and reduce opportunities for the suspect to intimidate the victim or otherwise misuse authority to manipulate fellow officers' response. Coercive control begins before the 911 call, and offenders may attempt to influence law enforcement by presenting unsubstantiated claims as fact—leveraging their knowledge of how these cases are handled. They are not only experts in their abuse but also in navigating the system itself.

Survivors of OIDV often need specialized safety supports, and separation creates a safer space for victims to express preferences and specific safety concerns to responding officers. To the extent reasonably possible, honoring the victim's requests can improve safety and long-term case participation by reducing barriers to engagement with the agency and victim services. Referrals to trauma-informed and culturally specific providers increase safety and support the provision of appropriate care. From the outset, the goal in OIDV cases should mirror that of any other investigation: to apply trauma-informed care with victim safety as the guiding principle.

Tip 4

Conduct thorough, independent investigations. Criminal investigation of OIDV incidents should be conducted by an external entity. Independent investigations help reduce perceptions of conflicts of interest and potential favoritism while strengthening community trust. For both the community and survivors, confidence in the process depends on the belief that it is fair, impartial, and unbiased.

Responding officers should promptly collect and preserve fleeting or ephemeral evidence and immediate statements—such as excited utterances and the condition of the scene—that can change rapidly, but they must also maintain investigative integrity as they await the arrival of independent investigators.

As with any case involving concurrent criminal and administrative (internal affairs) components, the two investigations should be conducted by different teams of investigators. While agencies generally prioritize criminal investigations, administrative investigations are often the best opportunity for accountability, and agencies should not neglect them.

Tip 5

Enforce clear, consistent consequences for policy violations. Addressing all OIDV incidents using the same policy and procedures is essential, as accountability must apply equally to everyone. Consistent enforcement strengthens internal equity and reinforces public confidence that the department is committed to addressing OIDV with integrity.

This principle is especially important when both parties are employed by the same agency. In these cases, one person must be treated as a victim, while the other is afforded all applicable constitutional and contractual rights. How an agency navigates two-party OIDV incidents can significantly impact organizational credibility, employee morale, and public trust.

While not all OIDV cases will result in termination of employment or criminal charges, other disciplinary measures for sustained administrative charges may include probation, suspension, demotion, loss of certain privileges, loss of leave, mandatory training or counseling, and other measures.

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