

News **Metro**

New Minneapolis initiative aims to handle less-serious domestic crises differently

“What I would absolutely love to see is ... tailored approaches to each family and each offender,” said Assistant City Attorney Jennifer Saunders.

By [Jessica Lee](#) | Reporter



By interviewing victims and analyzing 911 data, Minneapolis learned that officers only filed police reports in about one out of every four domestic-related calls.

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Dec. 20, 2019 In 2016, under the direction of former Minneapolis [Mayor Betsy Hodges](#), city attorneys and police officers teamed up to figure out why the majority of 911 calls in Minneapolis are about domestic violence, whether they be attacks between romantic partners or issues between children and parents.

By interviewing victims and analyzing 911 data, the group learned that officers only filed police reports in about one out of every four domestic-related calls.

“The vast majority of them ... there was no crime,” said Assistant City Attorney Jennifer Saunders, who is a supervisor in the office’s criminal division. “It was just families having, you know, moments of crisis and having issues and they didn’t know who else to reach out to.”

From that point, she said, paralegals in the [City Attorney’s office](#) and [MPD](#) leaders helped connect family therapists and officers to families to see what they needed to avoid future crises. Through that work, project leaders recognized a gap in the city’s system: In Minneapolis, there was nobody for those involved in low-level domestic violence incidents to turn to besides police.

Now, the Minneapolis City Council and City Attorney’s office are taking steps to fill that void. In the city’s 2020 budget, which the council unanimously approved Dec. 11, council members set aside \$150,000 to kickstart a new initiative that aims to divert offenders of less-serious domestic crimes out of the traditional criminal-justice system by allowing them to go to therapy after their arrests to avoid jail time or permanent convictions on their criminal records.

The new initiative would also include an emergency, civilian-run call line for victims to rely on for de-escalating situations instead of using 911, under the plan outlined in the 2020 budget.

“There’s recognition that [domestic violence in Minneapolis] needs to be addressed more closely than it has been traditionally through [traditional batterer intervention](#),” Saunders said. “Treating a low-level offender like a chronic offender does not work.”

Understanding the problem

Overall, the number of domestic assaults in Minneapolis have steadily increased since 2009 — both citywide and in most precincts —

according to 911 call data.

Dispatchers label incoming calls in a computerized queue based on the information they gather from callers. In those initial interviews, the majority of situations in Minneapolis appear to have some sort of “domestic element,” with an annual average of about 25,000 calls, according to Lt. Christopher Hildreth, who leads MPD’s unit for investigating domestic violence.

Then, after officers go to the scenes, they often change the calls’ code to reflect whether the alleged offenders intimately know the victims and the crime appears to meet Minnesota’s statutory definition of [domestic crimes](#), narrowing the calls to an average of 5,000 cases per year. (A [city-sponsored group](#) is now studying if, or to what extent, the city could change [the 911 categorization system](#) and if civilians could respond to domestic-related calls instead of police.)

From there, Hildreth’s team of 10 MPD investigators and detectives take over the domestic cases.

For most investigations, the team has a clear idea of who’s in the wrong — usually a man who’s abusing his female partner. Those cases often cover a variety of crimes, including stalking and attempted murder, and often the alleged offenders are members of gangs who run illegal drug circles or social networks that rely on gun violence to solve disputes.

But then there are a minority of cases, Hildreth said, where the tension between couples is more nuanced — 911 calls that are a result of small disagreements that escalate into big fights and speak to complicated power imbalances in relationships. Those are the types of situations he said he expects city leaders’ new diversion efforts to help. “We get hundreds and hundreds of cases like that where it’s really petty stuff — they got in an argument over a glass of water, or she thought he was looking at porn on his phone, or she saw him looking at a text from some other girl,” he said.

For all investigations, Hildreth said his team reviews footage from all [body-worn cameras](#) and interviews the victims — information that the team then presents to prosecutors who decide whether to file criminal charges against the alleged suspects or to release them from custody. The City Attorney's Office handles all misdemeanor cases, while the Hennepin County Attorney's Office makes charging decisions for more serious allegations.

Throughout that process, officers and victim-witness specialists ask victims to answer surveys about their living situation and relationship to the alleged offender and explain in their own words why someone had called police. The police investigators will also check if the perpetrators have a history of domestic assaults, a pattern that will determine the severity of charges filed against them.

“Minneapolis is a fairly progressive city in how we handle stuff, so we have a fairly robust protocol for every single officer that answers domestics,” Hildreth said. “They’re trying to [figure] out those cases where we think, ‘Hey, these might be more dangerous. There’s some red flags here.’ We’re trying to capture those cases — what should come to the top of the pile.”

Hildreth, who previously ran MPD efforts to change officers' response to domestic abuse at the precinct level, said while gathering the evidence to send to prosecutors, his team often prioritizes forensic data, such as body-cam video or fingerprint evidence, over the stories of victims. That's because, he said, they often stop cooperating with police when they realize the potential outcomes of their conversations with authorities and change the details of events.

“There's kind of this old adage in police work and prosecution: no victim, no crime. Well, because of the knowledge that we have about the dynamics of domestics, that notion has gone away,” he said. “You get people that are, like, ‘I just don't want government involved in my life. I still love this guy.’”

Council Member [Phillipe Cunningham](#), who is helping lead the city's new efforts, said he is focused on shaping the work around those "victims of silence in their own homes."

A new effort

[Research shows](#) that children who witness or suffer injuries from their parents, relatives or someone close to them may be at greater risk to grow up and repeat the violence.

"We're really in a powder keg of future violence," Cunningham said of the city's children and teens.

For that reason, he and supporters are working toward a "whole family intervention" program that would further expand the city's portfolio of [efforts to curb crime outside of MPD](#), working with families who are prone to disputes or have had fights in the past.

In [2020 budget talks](#), the council agreed to set aside [\\$50,000](#) for the new effort, at the request of Cunningham and Council President [Lisa Bender](#). That money will allow the city to partner with the NYC-based [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#) to run the technical side of the intervention program, Cunningham said, much like how the college provides tech assistance for the city's program that is focused on stopping gang violence, called [Group Violence Intervention](#) (GVI).

The council member said he envisions the new program to operate similarly to GVI, with domestic-violence prevention advocates on call to answer emergency calls from residents who need help resolving disputes with those closest to them. The new initiative would also invite those prone to crisis situations (children, parents, witnesses, etc.) to city-sponsored meetings and connect them with counseling that aims to deconstruct how past experiences affect behavior now.

"One of the identified gaps [in the current system] was a really good community-based resource that families feel comfortable using, you know, before they got to the point of maybe the crisis," Saunders said.

“Not everyone who commits domestic assault, for example, is a batterer; they may be coming from a background where violence is how they solve everything, or they have such a deep trauma background that they don’t know how to react in a healthy way.”

In the beginning, the new intervention effort may only function as a pilot, helping residents in just one of MPD’s five precincts, according to project leaders. Then, over the next couple years, they hope to expand the program citywide.

In addition, the 2020 budget sets aside \$75,000 to specifically change prosecutors’ approach to handling cases of domestic violence, alongside \$25,000 from the City Attorney’s Office itself.

That funding will help the city identify local nonprofits that are already working with repeat offenders to deconstruct their patterns and identify why they have violent outbursts — organizations that could partner with the city to launch the up-and-coming intervention program, Saunders said. Then, after partnering up, the City’s Attorney’s Office hopes to one day establish a new diversion program for repeat violators of domestic-related misdemeanors, similar to the office’s alternative-sentencing program for first-time gun offenders, [called Pathways](#).

“Quite frankly, with some offenses, putting somebody in jail for a couple of months — it’s probably not going to make that much of a difference [in behavior] anyway,” Saunders said. “What I would absolutely love to see is that we have tailored approaches to each family and each offender.”

Under [Minnesota law](#), perpetrators of domestic violence are required to complete counseling that meets certain criteria. So to establish the new program in Minneapolis, the attorney’s office is looking to partner with a community-based group that follows the state-mandated requirements *and* focuses on the trauma of domestic violence, Saunders said.

The latest funding boosts follow a \$60,000 dedication in the [2019 budget](#) to establish ongoing funding for the city’s “[domestic-violence hotspots program](#)” — the initiative created under [Hodges’](#) administration that coordinates efforts by police officers and social workers in areas of the city that tally a high concentration of domestic abuse, such as north Minneapolis.

Over the past decade, north Minneapolis’ Fourth Precinct surpassed all other areas for its annual totals of domestic assaults, which are the most frequent 911 calls for domestic incidents, police 911 data show. Between Dec. 1, 2018, and Dec. 1, 2019, the precinct tallied 425 such calls of the city’s 984 total.

But the way Saunders sees it, those calls show opportunities for intervention. “If you [can help] somebody who does not have a significant criminal history — they are under a lot of stressors; they just need some resources and some programming to help them deal with whatever has gotten them to the point where they’re violent with a loved one, before they get to the point where they are going to prison — that would be the ultimate goal.”

If you or someone you know is dealing with [domestic violence](#), call Hennepin County’s 24-hour crisis line at 612-379-6363 or the county’s line for counseling and shelters at 1-866-223-1111.



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