



“Working with police officers... says to the victim, ‘You really are important.’”

*Advocate,
Connecticut
National LAP participant*

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICE PROGRAM COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Key Points of Conversation

Gather Information

Build Rapport

Reinforce Danger

Educate and Safety Plan

Encourage

The purpose of these guidelines is to convey the points of conversation. We want to help you focus the conversation to better assure that the hotline advocate effectively, but briefly, communicates essential information. You'll do immediate safety planning and encourage the victim to come in for services.

Key Feature of Conversation | BREVITY

The conversation between the victim and the hotline advocate is a brief one of no more than 10 minutes, demonstrating the collaborative effort between your program and law enforcement, supporting the victim, and connecting the victim to your services.



**Maryland Network
Against Domestic Violence**

LETHALITY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Guideline 1: Gather Information from the Officer

When the officer calls, he/she will:

- Introduce him/herself by giving his/her name and agency,
- Advise you that he/she has a high danger victim, and
- Answer your questions, providing you with the following information:
 - Names of the victim and offender (if the victim has consented to this information being shared),
 - Case number,
 - Victim's "yes" responses to the Lethality Screen, and those questions the victim declined to or could not answer,
 - Briefly what happened and what actions the officer has taken,
 - Whether the victim is initially willing to speak with you.

If the officer does not identify him/herself or provide you with the above information, ask him/her so you are able to record it.

When you address the officer, identify yourself by your name. You do not need to include your surname.

Victim Declines to Speak with the Hotline Advocate

Once you have gathered all of the information listed above from the officer, and the officer tells you that the victim has declined to speak with you, **the officer will advise you that he/she will encourage the victim to speak one more time. The officer will then interrupt the conversation, and ask the victim if she/he has reconsidered.** If the officer does not indicate that he/she will ask the victim a final time if the victim would like to speak with you, request that the officer ask the victim.

If the victim then agrees to speak with you, the officer will turn the phone over to the victim and you will proceed with [Guideline 2: Building Rapport](#).

If the victim again declines to speak with you, convey brief safety planning (refer to [Safety Planning Checklist](#)) considerations to the victim through the officer, as well as other brief points you believe are relevant based on the victim's Lethality Screen responses or the officer's comments, that may be helpful in the victim's situation. **Request the officer to ask the victim if you may follow up with the victim tomorrow.**

After you have provided safety planning information and obtained a safe plan to follow up with the victim, you can **hang up the phone.**

Guideline 2: Build Rapport

Victim Agrees to Speak with the Hotline Advocate

When the victim comes to the phone, introduce yourself.

→ *My name is Michelle.*

Thank the victim for speaking with you and acknowledge that you understand how difficult speaking with you is for her/him.

→ *Thank you for talking with me. I appreciate your speaking with me now; I know it's a very stressful time.*

Briefly explain your program's confidentiality policy. Transparency about your program's confidentiality and reporting policies will allow the victim to make informed choices before accessing services.

→ *Before we get started, I would just like to take a moment to tell you about our organization and our confidentiality policy.*

Briefly explain your program's services. Describe the type of support services and accommodations, such as, bilingual support groups, private rooms, meals, provisions for children, etc.

→ *Just to let you know, we have many services here for you. We have a twenty-four hour hotline, a safe house where you can stay for a few months, a free-clothes closet, no-cost counseling, etc.*

Empathize with the victim's situation; and express your admiration of the victim's courage and your and the officer's support of her/him.

→ *I'm sorry you had to go through this. I hope you realize how much courage it took for you to talk to Officer Hunt and me. I'm glad you decided to talk with me.*

Guideline 3: Reiterate Danger

Reiterate how dangerous the situation is and express your concern for the victim's (and her/his children's) well-being.

→ *I'm really concerned about you and your son after hearing what happened and what your responses to the Screen that you did with Officer Hunt were.*

Reinforce what the officer has already told the victim: that in situations such as this people have been killed.

→ *The officer may have already told you, but mothers and their children in your situation have died as a result of the abuse. I really want to make sure that you and our son are going to be okay.*

Guideline 4: Provide Education and Safety Plan

Beginning the Conversation:

It is crucial to find out what the victim's biggest safety concerns are—do not try to impose your concerns on the victim. Tailor your suggestions to the issues the victim is prioritizing.

Ask: “What is your biggest concern right now?”

→ *If you don't mind, I'd like to spend a little time creating a safety plan with you for tonight. I know that Lee is being taken into custody, but he might be released within several hours, so I'd like to help you create some ways to be safe.*

→ *I understand that you want to stay in your house. Can we try to think of a place that, in case of an emergency, you and your son would be comfortable and safe if you had to leave right away?*

→ *As I mentioned before, we have a safe house here where you and your son can stay for tonight or longer, if you'd like. Is that something that you might be interested in?*

→ *It would also be a good idea to teach your son how to call for help. Do you think that you could do that?*

→ *Another step you can take to stay safe is to identify the safest route outside of your house. That way, if something happened and you needed to get out right away, you would have already thought through the safest way.*

→ *You can also consider picking up a 911 cell phone from us. That's something you could always have with you, or put in your packed bag, just to feel a little safer.*

Safety plan with the victim for her/his immediate needs (i.e., safety and specific living arrangements over the next 24 hours).

See the **Safety Planning Checklist** in the appendix as a guide. But, remember, not all High-Danger victims will consider themselves to be in danger at that time.

Safety planning over the next 24 hours may not be a priority for the victim, in which case you should concentrate on options if the victim would find her/himself in a dangerous situation.

Technology Tip:

As you safety plan, be aware of which phone the victim is using. If it is her/his personal cell phone or landline, that call may be tracked or recorded by the abuser. Be cautious in giving a shelter address or confirming specific safety precautions (such as who exactly the victim will be staying with or where the victim hid the abuser's weapons) when the victim is using his/her personal phone.

What to do if the victim needs to speak with you for more than 10 minutes.

A conversation that you believe needs more time requires you to:

- Interrupt it,
- Speak with the officer, and
- Allow the officer to decide if his/her presence is still needed at the scene.

If the officer believes his/her presence is still required or he/she must soon depart, you and the officer must quickly make an arrangement. For example, the phone conversation could be paused so the officer can wrap-up on the scene. Arrange with the victim a safe way to call you back and make sure that the arrangement is clearly worked out before you hang up.

Guideline 4: Provide Education and Safety Plan

As you safety plan, you will also want to explain that the abuse is not the victim's fault, that it is an issue of control, that it is characterized by a pattern, and may become worse and more frequent.

Provide examples, if appropriate, from the power and control wheel, cycle of violence, or specifically from the victim's Lethality Screen responses. If the victim rationalizes or minimizes the abuser's behavior, such as, "He only does this when he starts drinking," respond with statements that focus on the abuser's accountability.

→ *It's so important for you to know that this isn't in any way, your fault.*

→ *There isn't anything that you could ever do that could justify him hurting you the way he did tonight.*

→ *The reason that people are abusive is because of a need to be in control.*

→ *It's really important for you to know that incidents almost always get worse and happen more often.*

→ *She made the choice to react that way.*

→ *Drinking doesn't cause her to hit you.*

→ *He's responsible for what he does, and hitting you is a crime.*

→ *There is often tends to be a cycle to violence. After an incident occurs, you find yourself in a good phase, where things seem okay again. Maybe he's apologetic. At some point later, things get tense again, little things start to happen and then, before you know it, another incident has occurred.*

Should the victim decide to go in now for shelter, you don't need to complete the remaining steps of these guidelines, except:

- Tell the victim what she/he may consider bringing to shelter.
- Ask the victim that if she/he changes her/his mind and decides not to go into shelter, whether a DVSP advocate can follow up with her/him the next day just to make sure she/he is safe, in which case you need a safe phone number on which to reach the victim.
- Ask the victim for permission to discuss shelter with the officer. If the victim consents, advise the officer about the victim's plans to enter shelter, discuss transportation options, and other logistic issues.

Guideline 5: Encourage the Victim to Come in for Services

Explain the services that your organization offers.

- **Focus on programs that the victim can use immediately:** a 24-hour hotline, assistance with protective orders, support group meetings, advocacy at the hospital, a 911 phone, shelter, food bank, clothes give-away, etc.
- **Meet the victim where she/he is.** Highlight programs that can help her/him now, regardless of whether she/he is leaving the relationship, such as, economic empowerment classes, support groups, legal advocacy, and referrals to culturally specific services, if appropriate.
 - **Explain how these programs work:** For example, a legal advocate can explain what is happening in the criminal case, case management could help the victim apply for government benefits.
- **Do not explain every service you provide.** The victim does not need to hear about prevention or training programs, for example, or programs targeting children with parents in abusive relationships if the victim does not have children.
- **Use a conversational tone.**
 - Do not have a prepared statement that you use for everyone—tailor the conversation to the victim's needs and ability to process information at the moment.

Remember: The goal is for the victim to receive further services and be safe. You can explain other programs in detail at the appointment.

Encourage the victim to come in for services and try to schedule an appointment at the earliest possible time.

→ *It sounds like you could really benefit from our services. I know it's been hard talking to me tonight, especially with everything that's going on. I want you to know that it can be really helpful to have the opportunity to talk to someone when you can feel safe and comfortable. Our services are free and there is someone who can watch and play with your son while you are here. We have an appointment available with Shannon at 10:00 a.m. Would that work with your schedule?*

→ *We have a legal advocate who could meet you at the bail hearing tomorrow to explain what is happening.*

→ *We have a phone that we can give you, so that if you need help, you have a way to do so.*

Schedule an appointment.

If the victim agrees to an appointment or further services, schedule the appointment immediately, while still on the phone with her/him. Provide the victim with the date, time and directions. Convey to the victim that she/he may want to change his or her mind about going in for the appointment, that she/he should still come in, and that the program is there to support her/him.

Tell the victim that you (or another staff member) will call her/him the next day to check on her/his well-being. Ask for a safe phone number and time to reach her/him.

→I want to tell you that you may feel a little anxious before the appointment, and you may feel like you don't want to come in. Come anyway. We're here to support you.

→So, we'll see you tomorrow morning at 10 am. Ask for Shannon. Do you have something to write with? I'd like to give you the address and directions to the Heartly House office.

→Is it safe for me to call you tomorrow morning to remind you of the appointment?

If the victim declines follow-up or expresses uncertainty, tell the victim you realize she/he may be feeling overwhelmed at the moment, but that due to the severity of the situation and her/his responses to the Lethality Screen, you are concerned for her/him and her/his children's safety. **Again, ask for a safe phone number on which to reach her/him.**

→I understand. Please also think about coming by to pick up a 911 cell phone or to see if the clothes in our closet would fit your kids.

→Why don't I call you tomorrow and we can talk a little bit more. That will give you some time to process everything you've been through tonight and we can wait to talk about scheduling an appointment then.

→I'm just really concerned about you and I want to make sure that you're safe and getting the support you deserve.

→Can you give me a phone number that would be safe for me to reach you on tomorrow? What time is safe to call?

CONCLUDING THE CALL

Validate the victim's feelings and confirm plan (including follow up):

→Thanks again for talking with me Elizabeth.

→I hope you realize how strong and courageous you have been through this difficult process.

→Just try to take some time tonight to relax and maybe do something fun with your son to take your mind off of things.

→The officer will make sure that you have our hotline number before he/she leaves.

→We'll see you at your appointment tomorrow at noon.

→I'll call you on your work-line tomorrow to check in with you.

→If you miss the appointment, I will call your sister to confirm that you are okay.

Ask for permission to speak with the officer and to convey the basic plan you have developed.

→Do you mind if I talk to Officer Hunt about the plan that we came up with together?

→Can I tell Officer Hunt it's all right to leave, and that you have an appointment to come in tomorrow?

Conclude the call: if permission is given, convey the basic plan to the officer and thank the officer.

→I appreciate you waiting for us to wrap up the call. Elizabeth is going to stay at her sister's tonight. Can you stay until she finishes packing her bag?

→Thank you for calling tonight. Elizabeth did not make an appointment, but I have permission to follow up with her tomorrow and to contact her sister if I can't reach her.

Note: The officer stays with the victim during this call, to show the victim support and to demonstrate that you and law enforcement are working collaboratively to help the victim. It is important to show that you are all on the same team, working toward the same goal: the victim's safety.