

“Now we can play a more active role in facilitating assistance for the victims.”

Plainville Police Department Sergeant,
Connecticut
National LAP participant

Video Study Guide for Law Enforcement

Key Points of Conversation

Using intuition and evidence

Language of
lethality assessment:
Body language & vocabulary

A tool for empowerment

This document is meant to be a video-based discussion aide for trainers of law enforcement agencies and/or domestic violence service programs (DVSPs). It is a **guide**, not a rule, and can be easily adapted to suit the sensitivities or concerns of the training group.

Please note: a scene-by-scene summary/partial transcription is available upon request.

Length of Video: **18:54**.

USING INTUITION AND EVIDENCE

The following questions will guide group discussion around the importance of both intuition and evidence in responding to High-Danger domestic violence victims.

“Something’s gonna happen in that house.”

- Officer, when leaving the scene with his fellow officer in Scene 2

FOR OFFICERS:

- Have you ever walked away from a call for service for a domestic violence incident and felt uncomfortable?
- What about those situations makes you uncomfortable?
- What have you done in those situations?

FOR ADVOCATES:

- What types of tools do you think would be useful for the officers responding to this domestic violence incident?

Affirm officers’ ability to intuitively assess a victim’s situation and respond as they see fit to ensure her/his safety. Many officers have been doing this work for years, so they will be bringing a range of experiences and knowledge to this training.

“This information is based on research...”

- Narrator, when introducing “lethality assessment” in Scene 4

FOR BOTH OFFICERS AND ADVOCATES:

- Why might we be more inclined to trust tools that are “evidence-based” as opposed to those that are not?
- Why would an evidence-based tool be preferable to or affirming of that sinking feeling that “something is wrong”?

*Remind participants that the Lethality Screen is a tool for officers and advocates to more accurately assess the victim’s danger of severe re-assault or death. It cannot empirically determine that a person who manifests certain predictors will be killed; however, certain critical factors have shown to be predictive of lethal outcomes across the population. Thus, the Lethality Screen **is a tool for PREDICTING the likelihood of severe assault or death, and PREVENTING its occurrence** by giving officers an evidence-based way to corroborate their instincts and an accompanying protocol to increase victim safety.*

LANGUAGE OF LETHALITY ASSESSMENT: BODY LANGUAGE

The following questions will help guide group discussion around the importance of body language while officers are conducting a lethality assessment.

“Ma’am, I’d like to ask you some questions...”

- Officer, upon initiating the lethality screen in Scene #8

FOR BOTH OFFICERS AND ADVOCATES:

- What did you notice about the way the officer interacts with the victim?

Some observations (if not mentioned by group):

- *The officer reads the questions word-for-word, but knows them well enough that he can look her in the eye when asking.*
- *He does not express any judgment or shock, for example, when the victim says that her abuser has threatened to kill her and her children.*
- *He doesn't rush through the questions, and allows the victim to give more extensive answers than are needed to check the box.*
- *He's sitting on her level—not standing up and looking down on her.*
- *He speaks slowly, which is important for people who have been traumatized.*

FOR ADVOCATES:

- As you will only be speaking with the victim on the phone during the hotline call, what are some ways in which you can communicate, through your voice and words, the same supportive, non-judgmental attitude?

GENERAL BODY LANGUAGE GUIDELINES WITH VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

- Conduct the Lethality Screen in a place where victims feel comfortable and secure, away from the abuser (if he/she is on the scene) and preferably not in the presence of children
- Place yourself at the victim's level rather than standing over the victim
- Think about how you use your body to express concern, by nodding your head; maintaining natural eye contact; keeping an open stance, rather than crossing your arms; speaking in a calm, empathetic tone of voice.

LANGUAGE OF LETHALITY ASSESSMENT: VOCABULARY

Vocabulary, too, plays a crucial role in lethality assessment. These questions will help guide group conversation around how language affects interaction with victims.

“Your answers tell me that you’re in serious danger.”

- Officer, after reviewing the victim's responses on the lethality screen, Scene #8

- How does this sound different than, “You’re in serious danger” or, “I think you’re in serious danger”?

The officer is reinforcing that he's not just relying on his “gut instinct” or “professional opinion”; the evidence-based screen is designed to allow the officer to make a clearer determination, and to “open the victim's eyes” to the severity of her/his situation.

“People in your position have been killed.”

- Why does the officer uses such strong language?

Walk participants through “Stages of Change” theory, and remind them that sometimes victims are not ready to define their partner's behavior as abuse, nor to make preparations to leave. The officer's explanation of the Lethality Screen's results provides the victim an alternative perspective on her situation, with the hope that she will eventually be able to seek a life free from abuse. **Both advocates and law enforcement officers should use the same clear, strong language. This communicates to the victim that they are working AS A TEAM, and that she has a multi-disciplinary support system should she want to seek help.**

“I would like to contact a DV counselor.”

- What is the difference between this and, “You need to talk to someone,” or “I have to call someone for you”?

The officer is communicating that he is “on her side,” that he is an advocate for her safety. When victims feel supported, they might be more likely to seek help. Officers should avoid saying, “This is something we’re required to do,” as it communicates that they are calling the hotline out of obligation, rather than genuine concern for the victim's safety.

A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT

This last section will reinforce two of the greatest advantages of the Lethality Assessment Program: its proactive approach, and its empowerment-modeled design.

***“You don’t have to talk to them,
but I would like for you to think about it
while I’m on the phone.”***

- Officer, before making the phone call to the DV hotline, Scene #8

- The narrator said in his introduction that the hotline call is a “proactive way of dealing with serious cases.” What about the officer’s persistence in this scene was “proactive”?
- Why might this be beneficial to getting a victim to speak to a trained hotline advocate?

Explain that it is the phone call that makes the Lethality Assessment Program a substantive, proactive approach. Dr. Campbell’s research shows that very few victims who were killed by their intimate partners availed themselves of services in the year prior to their death. The entire purpose of the Lethality Screen and accompanying hotline call is to try to get those who are in danger of homicide into services. Making contact with the hotline is the most critical step in getting that victim in to services and preventing death.

- How might asking the victim if she would like to speak to a hotline advocate, and gently encouraging her to do so, be empowering?

A key element of abuse is control. Abusers control their victims, telling them what they are and aren’t allowed to do and think. By involving her in a decision-making process about her own safety, you are allowing her to exercise her own ability to make decisions independent of her abuser. Also, “knowledge is power.” When victims know that help is available, and that there are law enforcement and service providers in their community working together to ensure their safety, they can make more informed decision to leave the relationship, even if they are not ready to leave immediately.

BARRIERS TO VICTIM SAFETY: Revisited

Complete this guided discussion with the following questions:

What barriers to victim safety does the Lethality Assessment Program address?

What barriers to victim safety still remain?

Do you feel that you now have a better understanding of how the LAP works?

What questions do you still have?

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