

# Media Guide

A Guide for Media Professionals Reporting on Domestic Violence

## Introduction

Domestic violence can be a difficult issue to investigate and report on. This media guide was created to assist journalists in covering stories involving domestic violence in a more expansive, engaged, and empowering lens. We do this by helping media professionals develop a deeper understanding of domestic violence, connecting journalists to community-based domestic violence advocacy programs who can be used as sources to improve coverage, and discussing ways to best engage victims in telling their stories.

"When coverage of domestic violence crimes conveys a sense of hope and empowerment, communities can take action to address domestic violence. People can learn about the warnings signs, how to support a friend or family member experiencing violence in their relationship, and the resources that are available to survivors. Communities can make a difference by working together to address holding abusers accountable, re-affirming that violence will not be tolerated, and reaching out to our children by promoting healthy relationships."

48 People in Colorado Died As a Result of DV in 2016



1 in 7 people in Colorado experience domestic violence

Approx. 1/3 of women experiencing homelessness cite DV as the primary cause



## What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviors that can include physical, emotional, sexual, and/or financial abuse. It is pervasive, often life-threatening, and affects thousands of individuals across Colorado regardless of race, age, economic status, religion, education, or gender.

The criminal definition of domestic violence is more narrow; therefore, not all acts of domestic violence are criminal, based on Colorado law. Our current response to relationship violence (RV) is primarily one of intervention, with overreliance on the criminal legal system to address violence after it has occurred. However, most domestic violence goes unreported to police, and victims instead may choose to disclose to friends, family, doctors, or other community supports including community based domestic violence organizations. Survivors are the experts on their situation, and they know when and to whom it is safe to tell.

### Colorado Criminal Law

Colorado Revised Statute §18-6-800.3 defines "domestic violence" as "an act or threatened act of violence upon a person with whom the actor is or has been involved in an intimate relationship."

"Domestic violence" also includes any other crime against a person, or against property, including an animal, or any municipal ordinance violation against a person, or against property, including an animal, when used as a method of coercion, control, punishment, intimidation, or revenge directed against a person with whom the actor is or has been involved in an intimate relationship.

For a more complete inventory of current Colorado laws on domestic violence, go to: [http://womenslaw.org/statutes\\_root.php?state\\_code=CO](http://womenslaw.org/statutes_root.php?state_code=CO)

## Enhance Reader Understanding: the Do's

### Abuse is a Choice

Relationship abuse is a choice made by the perpetrator. It is not the result of someone "snapping," nor is it a "crime of passion."

Using these stereotypes removes accountability from the abuser and removes the incident of violence from the greater context of a pattern of abuse.

### Diversify Sources

Seek sources beyond law enforcement and neighbors/friends. DV advocates are legitimate sources that can supplement comments from other sources who may not understand the issue as well

For example: If you quote a neighbor saying, "He seemed like a normal guy", balance it with a quote from an advocate, "In reality, many people convicted of domestic violence are well respected in their communities or at work, but choose to be abusive toward their intimate partners."

*By accurately covering domestic violence homicides, journalists and news outlets have the opportunity to make a significant difference in helping the community understand how domestic violence can go unchecked and unrecognized as a problem until it escalates to an extreme and often tragic level.*

### Active Voice

Passive voice makes the abuser invisible, and fails to make explicit that there was a person responsible for harming the victim.

Example: Instead of "the victim was attacked by her husband," write "the victim's husband attacked her"

### Display Resources

Always display local or nat'l resources for viewers/listeners/readers during or at the end of your coverage

Colorado's State Helpline (for abusers, survivors, and the community): 1-855-9StandUp

National DV Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE

Find the crisis line number for your local DV advocacy organization: <http://ccadv.org/find-help/programs-by-county/>

## Pitfalls: the Do Not's

A dispute or argument implies equal power. Domestic violence, is a serious, pattern of abuse used to control an individual, and victims do not have equal power in their relationships. Using "domestic disputes" undermines the seriousness of the incident, implies equal participation of the parties, and characterizes the incident as isolated rather than a pattern of abuse.



Avoid the phrase 'domestic dispute'

The word alleged fits within the tenet of professional journalism, but there is a time and place for its use.

For example: Use 'accused' to describe the alleged abuser. Instead of "the victim was allegedly attacked by her husband," write "the victim told police her husband attacked her"



Use discretion with the term 'alleged'

Discussing why the survivor stays with or goes back to the abuser is irrelevant and distracts from the perpetrator, implying that the victim is somehow complicit in the abuse



Is victim's past behavior really relevant?

*Survivors of domestic violence have experienced trauma, often daily, for sustained periods of time. Reporting on these stories can be difficult, and your questions have the potential to retraumatize victims. But survivors are the experts of their stories, and when possible, it's important to let them tell their side.*

*We've compiled some examples from experiences with survivors who have been interviewed by local media. Here is what they recommend:*

## Interviewing Survivors

**Offer the option of not being identified by their full name or image**

Some survivors do not mind identifying themselves, but others still have valid safety concerns. In some cases, they may want to focus the camera on their hands, or you may offer to darken their image.

**Acknowledge what they have been through**

Something as simple as, 'I'm so sorry for what you're going through/what happened'.

**Ask them about other things in their life**

They are not defined by what someone else has chosen to do to them. They are more likely to open up and give you a little more information when the entire conversation is not focused on their victimization. It makes them feel human and more whole.

**Allow them to bring a support person and let them know they can take breaks**

Victims of domestic violence have been stripped of control. You can empower them in simple ways; for example, let them decide where they would like to do the interview and who they want present.

**\*ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION FOR REPORTER:** Don't underestimate your own reactions to the details of your interviewee's story. Take time after the interview to process your reactions. You can reach out to a local DV program to talk with someone about how you are feeling.



For more information, contact CCADV at 303-962-0936

or reach out to your community's local DV advocacy organization: <http://ccadv.org/find-help/programs-by-county/>

Community based domestic violence advocacy programs are an invaluable resource for journalists researching stories and looking for experts to interview during news coverage. They work day-to-day with survivors through their hotlines, offering free and confidential advocacy, safety planning, emergency shelter, housing, legal and medical advocacy, and other support services.

### Resources:

- Domestic Violence: A Guide for Media Coverage from the Iowa Domestic Abuse Death Review Team
- Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage from Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010)
- Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Colorado Domestic Violence Report (2016) at [http://crimeinco.cbi.state.co.us/cic2k16/supplemental\\_reports/domestic.php](http://crimeinco.cbi.state.co.us/cic2k16/supplemental_reports/domestic.php)