



San Diego City Attorney
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Support and a Safe Place for Victims of Domestic Violence

By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott and District Attorney Summer Stephan

The November 16th murder-suicide in Paradise Hills illustrates the critical importance of early action to protect domestic violence victims and their families before violence escalates. A 29-year-old mother and four of her children -- ages 3, 5, 9 and 11 -- were shot and killed in the culmination of a father's ongoing campaign of harassment and terror.

The tragedy has re-focused the community's attention on domestic violence and highlights the importance of a safe place where victims can go for help in San Diego County. It should also remind us all that police should be called when there's violence or a direct threat of violence.

The San Diego County Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team tracks all domestic violence-related homicides and our county averages 13 a year. Even one homicide is too many. That's why we must remain vigilant in our efforts to spread awareness around this public health and safety issue.

Last year, more than 17,000 domestic violence reports were made to law enforcement. In the face of this ongoing threat to our families, friends and neighbors, two entities stand together to prevent domestic violence and protect victims and their children. The San Diego City Attorney's Office and the San Diego County District Attorney's Office want victims to know there are life-saving resources available to them.

One incredible resource is the San Diego Family Justice Center. Every year, thousands of San Diegans come through the Family Justice Center, a safe place where domestic violence victims and their children can reclaim their lives, seek justice, and begin healing. The Center, part of the City Attorney's Office, brings together community partners, including therapists, *pro bono* attorneys, forensic medical nurses, domestic violence advocates, military liaisons, prosecutors, and the San Diego Police Department all under one roof.

The District Attorney's Office is a strong partner in the Family Justice Center. Its on-site advocates work side-by-side with community partners to support victims fleeing violent relationships, to help victims understand the criminal justice process, and to bring abusers to justice.

Among the services the Family Justice Center provides are referrals to emergency housing and help in creating a Safety Plan for victims of, or people threatened with, domestic violence. A good Safety Plan is critical and should be in place before seeking a restraining order. Typically, the first 72 hours after a restraining order is granted can be the most dangerous for victims of domestic violence.

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Part of a Safety Plan includes:

- Thinking of a safe place to go if an argument occurs – avoid rooms with no exits (bathroom), or rooms with weapons (kitchen)
- Thinking about and making a list of safe people to contact
- Teaching your children how to call 911
- Memorizing all important numbers (friends, SSN, etc.)
- Establishing a “code word” or “sign” so that family, friends, teachers or co-workers know when to call for help

Another tool available to victims of domestic violence is the Gun Violence Restraining Order, which was pioneered by the City Attorney’s Office. A GVRO can be ordered against a person who poses a clear threat to himself or others, preventing him from possessing, accessing or purchasing firearms or ammunition.

Health care professionals have also been recruited to help recognize victims and refer them to law enforcement or services. Last month, the District Attorney’s Office and the County’s Health and Human Services Agency launched San Diego County Health CARES to bring greater awareness among health care providers to signs of strangulation crimes and help them identify victims of strangulation who might not otherwise report abuse.

Domestic violence is still the number one killer of women when it comes to violent crime in U.S. and causes a ripple effect that directly harms children, takes a toll on victims’ mental health, and—as we saw last weekend—can shake a community.

As a society, we must stand up to it and make sure victims have a safe place to go across the region where there are professionals who care and can provide the tools to stop violence from escalating to murder. Victims of domestic violence often feel like they are in a dark tunnel alone. We want them to know that we stand with them and are ready to provide real time help to guide them into the light and to safety.

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Mara W. Elliott is the San Diego City Attorney. Summer Stephan is the San Diego County District Attorney. The San Diego Family Justice Center is located at 1122 Broadway, Suite 200, in downtown San Diego. If you or someone you know needs help or wants to learn more about personalized safety planning and Domestic Violence resources, call the National DV Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or to go thehotline.org or loveisrespect.org. More resources can be found at www.SanDiegoDA.com and www.SanDiego.gov/CityAttorney

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