Domestic Violence From an Officer's Perspective

One former officer is training law enforcement around the world how to earn the trust of survivors

* September 11, 2015 - By domesticshelters.org



After surviving a childhood of domestic violence, Mark Wynn’s life could have gone one of two ways: He could have continued the cycle of violence or become part of the solution. He decided on the latter and became a police officer, vowing to serve and protect. But Wynn soon realized that carrying a gun and a badge only stopped the violence temporarily.

“Police officers are missing an incredible amount of crimes within domestic violence. Many victims [of domestic violence] … are also victims of intimate partner sexual assault, witness intimidation, strangulation, kidnapping and sexual assault.” The problem, he says, is that survivors have a hard time trusting police. And police have a difficult time earning that trust.

So, for the last 33 years, Wynn has been training officers in Violence Against Women Prevention. A few years after he began, his training went national and then, international. Wynn began training officers in China, Russia, Brazil and England, among other countries. In 2000, he left the Nashville police department force to focus solely on violence prevention efforts.

“There’s a victim experience that’s got to be understood by the officer so they won’t be frustrated. Just because you walk into someone’s home with a badge on doesn’t

mean you’re going to be trusted by the victim. Most likely, they’ve tried to call the police before and there have been negative consequences. Why would they talk to someone who’s going to get them hurt? That makes perfect sense to anybody.”

While police officers do receive domestic violence training, Wynn says its minimal, maybe 10 hours total. Yet, the percentage of domestic violence calls they’ll respond to during their career is significant; between [15-50 percent of all calls depending on the jurisdication](https://www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-statistics/law-enforcement-and-domestic-violence).

Sign up for emails

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

“We want to be a part of the solution. The reasons we miss these crimes is a lack of training. How do we communicate [to survivors] that they can trust us … that they can call us?” Wynn says it starts with looking at the culture inside police departments. “If I have officers who believe victims don’t care because they don’t press charges, or that they’re dumb or are asking for it, then that has to be dealt with.” Wynn says he encounters many officers who don’t understand and are frustrated when a survivor refuses to leave the abuser. He tries to shed light on the survivor’s side of things. “Leaving a violent relationship isn’t an event. It’s a process. They [survivors] have to trust the criminal justice system, trust an advocate, trust that their children will be safe.”

His advice for survivors: take it slowly. When officers arrive on scene, their first priority is making sure everyone is safe. Sometimes this means separating family members and being abrupt and to-the-point when speaking. This is part of their job, says Wynn, and not an attempt to be controlling. “They have to make sure they’re going to be safe and the victim is safe,” he says. After that, he says officers want to listen to the victim and help them however they can.

Wynn calls the time an officer has to earn a survivor’s trust after they arrive on scene, “the golden hour.” He advises officers to talk to survivors about what their options are, but to not try and force anything. “[Survivors] don’t need to be told what to do—they already have someone doing that. They need options. It takes patience, not frustration.

“This crime is different than all other crimes,” says Wynn. “Officers need to understand that while bad things may happen to the offender when police intervene, worse things often will happen to the victim.” Abusive partners often inflict more abuse on a survivor as punishment for calling the police. That’s why Wynn says he tries to teach officers that domestic violence is seldom a one-time crime.

Officers should be suspicious, cautions Wynn, if survivors deny previous abuse. “By the time we get a call, there’s been a long history there. Victims call a crisis line, or the police, on average, after the fifth assault.” Another troubling sentence: “When the survivor says, ‘I don’t want to file a report; I don’t want him to go to jail.’ Most crime victims don’t act that way. That proves to officer that there truly is a victim there.”

For more information on Wynn’s domestic violence prevention training, visit his website, [markwynn.com](http://www.markwynn.com/).