



# Intimate Partner Violence Reform Initiative — Year One Report

November 2023

**The Intimate Partner Violence Reform Initiative** was created in May 2022 to coordinate policy and system-level work across agencies in Allegheny County to improve a complex and fragmented system for both survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) and those who use violence. County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey, in partnership with the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh (WCS) and the FISA Foundation, formed the **Intimate Partner Violence Reform Leadership Team** to provide leadership and strategic direction for this work (see [press release](#) for more info).

During the past year, stakeholders from local and federal criminal justice systems, victim service organizations, community groups, healthcare and human services have worked to improve the ways in which people can access help, how our systems work together and share information, and how we can prevent the most serious harm. This report outlines the progress made in the first year of the initiative, as well as plans and priorities to continue these reform efforts.

## ABOUT IPV AND ITS DYNAMICS

According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), 1 in 3 women (and 1 in 4 men) will be victims of physical violence by an intimate partner. Abuse can lead to a host of long-term consequences for the physical and mental health of the victim and for children in the household, for financial stability, housing, and employment.

Many people victimized by IPV do not reach out for support from victim services or report the violence to the police.<sup>1</sup> Though IPV victimization has fallen since the mid-90s (like other violent victimization trends), recent research suggests that IPV increased by 8% nationwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, IPV and its impact are not equally distributed among demographic and economic groups. Although anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation, gender identity or age, can be impacted by IPV, there are a host of factors that impact the likelihood and intensity of IPV involvement, and they overlap with risk factors for violence in general.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), more than 80% of survivors did not receive assistance from victim services agencies. In 2020 and 2021, the National Crime Victimization Survey estimated that 50–60% of IPV victimizations were not reported to police.

## WHY FOCUS ON IPV IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY?

IPV affects the entire family and has consequences for our justice and social service systems. IPV plays a role in our child welfare system, in our behavioral health system, in our emergency shelter system and in our court and justice systems.

Whether IPV is formally reported or not, victims, aggressors and child witnesses are being served in large numbers in the courts, child welfare services, homeless and housing services, disability services, behavioral health services and the Allegheny County Jail. In Allegheny County in 2022, 32,710 incidents categorized as domestic violence (DV) were reported to 9-1-1, with a disproportionate volume and rate of calls coming from higher need communities in the eastern suburbs and Mon Valley areas of the county.

IPV results in or is a contributing factor in a sizable proportion of both family and criminal court filings. In 2022, 35% (271) of new child welfare cases had IPV listed as risk factor in the family, while 19% (3,529) of all new criminal filings were for DV/IPV related charges.

When our systems fail, the consequences can be dire. In 2009, three Pittsburgh Police officers responded to a domestic call and were killed in the line of duty. From 2013 through 2015, Allegheny County had the highest number of DV-related fatalities of counties in the Commonwealth and, from January 2017 through September 2022, intimate partner homicide claimed 45 lives, accounting for 7% of all homicides and 30% of all homicides with female victims.<sup>2</sup> In addition, between 2019 and 2022, 27% of alleged perpetrators in child deaths had a history of IPV as an aggressor or survivor. A systemic response is needed to ensure the safety and well-being of the victim, to provide rehabilitation and treatment to people using violence, and to deter those at highest risk of committing serious harm.

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<sup>2</sup> [Read more about intimate partner homicides in Allegheny County here.](#)

**WHO ARE THE STAKEHOLDERS?**

The leadership team was convened by the Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh and the County Executive of Allegheny County. It includes members from:

- Alle-Kiski Hope Center
- Allegheny County Department of Human Services
- Allegheny County Health Department
- Allegheny County Office of the District Attorney
- Allegheny County Public Defender's Office
- Fifth Judicial District of Pennsylvania
- FISA Foundation
- Gwen's Girls
- Nina Baldwin Fisher Foundation
- Office of the United States Attorney, Western Division
- Pittsburgh Bureau of Police
- Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh
- Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh (WC&S)
- YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh

## PRIORITIES/PLAN

The leadership team identified some core areas to focus on in the first year. These include:

| AREA  | PRIORITY   |
|---|--|
| <p>Improve access and connection to protective and supportive systems.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the Protection from Abuse (PFA) process more accessible for survivors.</li> <li>• Review progress and expand lethality assessment program to all law enforcement departments in Allegheny County.</li> <li>• Explore how current services for children exposed to violence could be enhanced (through collaboration, data collection, etc.) to work to break intergenerational cycle of violence.</li> <li>• Explore whether additional supports are needed for juveniles and young people using this type of violence.</li> </ul> |
| <p>Ensure that information is available to decision-makers at the right time.</p>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that the judges making bail decisions have the most complete information available to them to make the best decision for the survivor and person using violence.</li> <li>• Update the DV bench book for judges.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>Create common understanding of IPV and the systems we have that support survivors and people using violence.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine current training for personnel across all systems (judges, lawyers, frontline staff) and identify any gaps that exist. Create a plan to deliver quality training at regular intervals for new and existing staff.</li> <li>• Create a map of how survivors of IPV and people using violence access and flow through our systems.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>Improve coordination and transparency.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up quarterly IPV task force meetings and regular working groups.</li> <li>• Create public data and reports about work.</li> <li>• Identify gaps in information flows that result in challenges to keep people safe.</li> <li>• Create a plan to address gaps in information exchange across systems.</li> <li>• Explore integrated DV/IPV court models (family/criminal) and assess implementation feasibility.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>Focus resources on those who are most likely to cause serious harm.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement IPV fatality and near-fatality reviews, with a focus on creating action plans for system improvement.</li> <li>• Explore opportunities to better share information, communicate and intervene in high-risk situations.</li> </ul>   |

## IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

### Improve survivors access and connection to protective and support systems

#### Improved Protection from Abuse filing processes

The Fifth Judicial District of PA has implemented new technological solutions to improve accessibility to the PFA process. This includes allowing people seeking Emergency PFAs to begin the filing process online, thus allowing them to fill out forms in a place they feel most comfortable and saving them time when they come before a Magisterial District Judge to complete the process. They have also implemented a new electronic filing system at Family Court for Temporary PFAs, reducing redundant forms and increasing the efficiency of filing.

*Planned for 2024: The Court will continue to improve access to the PFA process by integrating emergency PFA filings in the district courts with temporary filings at Family Court. This integration will both decrease barriers for survivors to filing PFAs and improve understanding of the dynamics of PFA filings to inform further system improvements.*

#### Expanded use of lethality assessment protocols

Local police departments, with help from victim services agencies and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, began implementing Maryland's nationally recognized Lethality Assessment Program as its model in 2012. This model is a nationally recognized practice to prevent intimate partner homicides and serious injuries. It uses trained first responders to assess risk of homicide using the validated screening questions and connect high danger survivors to local domestic violence service programs via a hotline for emergency safety planning and enhanced service provision.<sup>3</sup>

There are currently 46 police departments in Allegheny County using this model, to varying degrees. However, some of the areas with the highest numbers and rates of IPV are not (including large parts of the Mon Valley). In 2023, the Office of the District Attorney, in partnership with victim services agencies, provided training on the Lethality Assessment Program and DV Police Response to various police departments in Allegheny County, training 58 police officers in 26 departments.

*Planned for 2024: The team will continue to train and expand the lethality assessment program to police departments, with a particular focus on areas of the Mon Valley. Analysis of use of LAP in Allegheny County shows that, although 9-1-1 calls for DV tend to be higher in this area of the county, few police departments are using the program. Targeted expansion of the Lethality Assessment Program can help maximize the impact and reach survivors at risk of lethality, helping to connect them to victim service agencies and other supports.*

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<sup>3</sup> Read more about Maryland's Lethality Assessment Program [here](#)

**Enhance services and supports to children and youth exposed to violence (and those who use it)**

More than a third of all new cases in child welfare have assessed IPV as a risk factor for the family. The county works with Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh to have dedicated IPV specialists in each of the county's child welfare offices to help coach case workers, case plan and connect survivors to supports. However, these coordinated resources do not exist for families not involved in child welfare.

*Planned for 2024: The team will examine the support in place for families at high risk of involvement in child welfare and for those already served by the system to understand the gaps and how to best fill them. The team will train the county's network of family centers in how to best support families experiencing IPV and will explore the use of cognitive behavioral therapy to break the cycle of violence, with a particular focus on youth who have both experienced violence and who are currently using it.*

**Ensure information available to decision makers at right time****New and improved information for judges at bail decisions**

Pennsylvania does not have a DV statute, making it challenging to understand the history of this type of violence. In 2022, Allegheny County Pretrial Services began flagging cases identified because of IPV/DV and providing that information to judges to help inform their decision-making. This information includes prior IPV/DV history, including information about prior victims.

In addition, as of July 20, 2023, Allegheny County Pretrial Services began providing an Indirect Criminal Contempt (ICC) Criminal History Report to the Magisterial District Judge at the time of preliminary arraignment. ICCs are filings for violations of PFAs. This information provides both pending criminal charges and convictions to judges to help inform their decision-making.

*Planned for 2024: The team will work to update the DV bench book for all judges to ensure they have the most up-to-date information available to inform their case decisions. In addition, the team is working to integrate information from Family Court to provide more automated PFA information to the high-risk teams and frontline workers.*

**Create common understanding of IPV and the systems to support survivors and people using violence****System mapping**

The team hosted a series of workshops to map how survivors and people using violence might interact with different systems. The workshops helped to inform areas of focus, in particular the focus on improving access and training around the PFA process.

*Planned for 2024: The team will document its findings and explore if additional, deeper, system mapping is needed to inform priorities and interventions.*

## Training

DV Trainings were also held beyond the regional police training described above.

The District Attorney's DV Unit Supervisor, WC&S and Pittsburgh Police DV specialists continued to provide DV training at the Pittsburgh Police Training Academy to new Pittsburgh Police supervisors (15 new supervisors on 10/5/22 and 25 new supervisors on 8/21/23) as well to a new class of recruits (an 8-hour training to 26 recruits on 10/26/23).

A training work group of the Task Force planned an IPV training for Fifth Judicial District Judges (Common Pleas and Magisterial district judges) that will take place in the Spring 2024. The training will be facilitated by nationally recognized experts in IPV and its dynamics in the courts.

WC&S, Neighborhood Legal Services, and Family Court's PFA Coordinator updated their 4-hour CLE curriculum on PFA Law/Procedures and DV Dynamics and trained 50 attorneys who will be providing Pro Bono legal representation to plaintiffs in final PFA hearings.

In addition, WC&S is helping to train hospital social workers at Magee-Women's Hospital and Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh on how to access and assist individuals in need of a PFA. That training will occur in 2024.

*Planned for 2024: The team will train hospital social workers on the PFA process and how to help connect survivors to that process and to victim services. The team is also working to create standardized trainings for all social services resource navigators around IPV and how to access the various systems.*

## Improve coordination and transparency

### System coordination

The Allegheny County Intimate Partner Violence task force was established to address the identified priorities and consists of representatives from law enforcement, victim services, healthcare, local and federal court systems, and human services. The task force is co-chaired by staff from WC&S and the Office of the District Attorney, with support from the Fifth Judicial District of PA (family and criminal divisions) and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. Member organizations of the task force are listed in the appendix. The multi-disciplinary task force meets quarterly to provide updates on work progress, to better coordinate among stakeholders and to discuss new and changing priorities.

*Planned for 2024: The team will continue its quarterly task force meetings, incorporating new stakeholders as appropriate. It will also continue to make data publicly available. This includes information on LAP usage, calls to 9-1-1 for domestic violence and estimates of prevalence.*

## Focus resources on those who are most likely to commit serious harm

### IPV homicide review and high-risk team

Allegheny County conducted homicide reviews for 45 IPV and IPV-related homicides in the county from 2017 through 2022. These reviews consisted of quantitative analysis on criminal justice histories, human services histories, and physical health histories for both perpetrators and victims as well as interviews with front-line workers on a subsection of these homicides. [Read more about intimate partner homicides in Allegheny County here.](#)

From this review, a high-risk working group was created to develop standards to help identify those people using violence who are at highest risk to cause serious harm or death, and to intervene to reduce that risk. The workgroup meets weekly and consists of members of law enforcement, the Office of the District Attorney, the Fifth Judicial District of PA (including Pretrial Services and Adult Probation), the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and WC&S.

*Planned for 2024: The team will implement interventions for those deemed high-risk and measure their effectiveness. In addition, the team will explore interventions and messaging for all people using violence. The team plans to implement retrospective IPV homicide and incident reviews to inform overall system improvements. The team is also exploring additional supports for people using violence, including using cognitive behavioral therapy as an intervention.*



**APPENDIX**

**APPENDIX**

**Task force member organizations:**

| <b>ORGANIZATION</b>                                 |
|---|
| Allegheny County Adult Probation                    |
| Allegheny County Department of Human Services       |
| Allegheny County Health Department                  |
| Allegheny County Police                             |
| Allegheny County Pretrial Services                  |
| Allegheny County Sheriff                            |
| Alle-Kiski Area HOPE Center                         |
| Center for Victims                                  |
| Crisis Center North                                 |
| Fifth Judicial District of PA, Criminal Division    |
| Fifth Judicial District of PA, Family Division      |
| Fifth Judicial District of PA, Court Administration |
| FISA Foundation                                     |
| Neighborhood Legal Services Association             |
| Office of the District Attorney                     |
| Office of the Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh       |
| Pittsburgh Police Department                        |
| U.S. Attorney's office, Western District            |
| U.S. Federal Probation                              |
| University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC)      |
| Women's Center & Shelter                            |
| YWCA  |