


How to Combat Officer-Involved Domestic Violence

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2013 Dishonored Badge Broken Trust

 Mark Wynn is a 21-year veteran of the Nashville Metropolitan Police Department who trains departments on officer-involved domestic violence. He spoke with FRONTLINE about why the problem is so complicated, and what still needs to be done. This is the edited transcript of an interview conducted on Oct. 29, 2013.

[question]As a police officer, did you ever have occasion to respond to domestic violence calls?
[/question]

Thousands over the years.

[question]... From what I've read, that can be a difficult assignment, is it not? [/question]

It is complex. It's confusing. It is dynamic. It's dangerous. There's a lot of emotional labor involved if you really do the work correctly. It's the most [frequently] committed and least reported crime in the country. There's no doubt about that.

[question]Least reported? Why is that?[/question]

There's a lot of reasons. You've got the social stigma. You've got fear. You've got love. You've got religion. You've got money. It's one of those crimes where the victim and the offender live together and they know each other. There's an emotional tie. Leaving is not easy.

As a matter of fact, one of the things that we now have realized after all these years — because we've been so busy asking the victim why she stayed in that relationship — is that we now understand that leaving is not an event. It's more of a process.

So the police have to play a part in that process and get that victim to safety. And that's got to be trained in the police officers. ...

These cases are ongoing. And they've been ongoing for years, and if we don't understand that, then we do more harm than good.

[question]As a police officer, have you ever responded to a domestic violence call involving another officer?[/question]

Absolutely.

[question]I would imagine that presents a special set of circumstances. [/question]

It does, and I don't make any excuses, but the pressure for the responding officers is heavy,

especially when it's somebody you know or you worked with.

In law enforcement, as you can imagine, like the military, you build bonds together by saving one another's lives. You know these folks so well, better than your own relatives. So it's a lot of pressure.

That's one of the obstacles that we realized over the years to holding ourselves accountable, for violence in the police family is understanding that there may be that tension, and we have to deal with that tension as leaders in policing.

But, you know, you've got a job. You work with the public, and you're accountable. You have to make sure the law keeps its promise.

"Whenever you are aware of a crime and you don't hold someone accountable, then you're colluding with a criminal."

[question]The woman who is battered would have to know about the special relationship that exists among police officers. Is that one of the reasons perhaps they are hesitant to call or know who to call? [/question]

There's no question, as a matter of fact. The dynamic in a domestic violence relationship ... is no different than when the husband is a police officer or the wife is a police officer. That dynamic is the same, which means that this is power-based violence, someone using power for intent to control another. And it's ongoing.

[question]And police know how to use power.[/question]

More than that, and this is the real dilemma that law enforcement faces, is that you get someone who already has a propensity to violence — and most often that's from childhood experiences. We believe about 85 percent of the offenders learn violence at an early age.

So you get that kind of a character in a badge, you've got a real problem, because when you train someone to be a cop, anyone in this country, you train them to challenge when confronted. You train them to interrogate when suspicious. You train them to [use] fighting skills that no one else has. You train them how to use weapons. You train them how to deal with conflict. You teach them all these skills, and then you add all of that to someone who is violent, you've got a lethal combination on your hands. ...

There's more to it than that, and I know that because I've been an investigating officer. And when you deal with these kinds of cases as a criminal investigator, not as a first responder, then you see all of this in the officers, especially when you start doing the interview interrogation, collection of evidence, interviewing witnesses.

You have a very special kind of victim, because they've been manipulated by a highly trained offender who also knows the law just like you do. So you've got a different kind of person that

you're investigating now. It takes a high degree of training and skill to investigate an officer-involved case. ...

[question]I rarely come across any news articles that tell the story of a police officer being arrested for domestic violence. I would imagine that means either it's not happening all that often or it's not being reported. Which is it?[/question]

That's a good question. I have to say that it is happening more today than ever before.

[question]Why is that?[/question]

I think there has been an awakening in policing, and that is in leadership. I've been training police chiefs since 1986, and in the recent past, I've seen a different generation of leaders who have been trained — I believe correctly — how to investigate domestic violence in the general public.

So they have a sense of what the right way is to handle the general public. How can they not do it for law enforcement? So I'm starting to see more officers arrested. I've arrested and prosecuted officers for domestic violence in my career, but I've specialized in that field of lieutenant detective with a specialized domestic violence division in my police department, and it was part of our responsibility to work these cases.

But I am seeing more and more. It's something that I think a lot of police chiefs and sheriffs will not broadcast to the media that they've done it, and I think that's a mistake. I think transparency is the key, because one of the difficulties we have with violence in a police family is reporting.

Victims don't report for other particular reasons, where the officer-offender will tell the victim that they won't believe you or me: "I have credibility; you don't"; "They'll circle the wagons and protect me"; and "I understand the law, and you don't"; "I'll lose my pension if you call my supervisors."

So there's other things that the domestic violence police victim has to deal with than the general public. In order for us to get that victim to call us, we have to communicate to the public that this is not going to be tolerated, and when we broadcast when we arrested and prosecuted our own, that's the way we communicate to the public that the law will keep its promise. The police family is just like public families.

[question]Do you have a handle on how many officers are arrested each year for domestic violence?[/question]

... I don't think we have seen a real study on this issue yet. And one of the reasons that we haven't been able to study it is because so few police departments have a policy on how to deal with it.

There's some informal policies across the country. There's some agencies that have great policies, and then there's some that sort of have a little of half-formal and then different operational policy in the field. So our data is not what it should be for us to really evaluate. ...

But let me say this. I think that if we believe that 10 to 15 percent of the population in this country is involved in domestic violence ... we at least have a 10 to 15 percent chance of getting someone in uniform who's an abuser. Now, what do we do about it once they get in the ranks? That's a whole other question.

[question]... You mentioned that it's important for police chiefs to broadcast a message that they view this as a significant problem. How is a victim supposed to know what to do? A woman sitting at home, she's just been [abused] by her police officer spouse or husband, what is she to do? Where does she turn? How does she know who to call? [/question]

Unfortunately, around the country, often the first place a victim can turn to is either a friend, a relative or a crisis line, and we need to expand that list of lifelines to this victim.

So it starts off early on, even before hiring. The prescreen process for law enforcement officers should also be about talking to spouses and family members of an officer.

As a matter of fact, it's not unusual now in large agencies around the country that you seek out spousal classes for men and women whose husbands and wives are going into law enforcement, because it's a stressful lifestyle, offering those folks early on an option that if you feel unsafe at any time while you are married to this person or connected to this person, you can reach out to us. ...

[question]Those classes aren't that common? [/question]

No, they're not, but they work, and that's part of a standard where we are preaching around the country that works, and it's sort of a three-part process.

What is your standard? Is your standard that you're going to protect the police families like you do the public?

What is your accountability? Who are you accountable to as a public servant? You're obviously accountable to the public, and you're also accountable to the families of your police officers. They have the same rights as anybody else in society.

And then third is your communication. How do you communicate that? Our police leaders stand up regularly and roll-call with the officers, the civic meetings or before camera when they talk to the news media and say: "This is how we feel about this. This is the most important thing that we do, protecting families and society, because if we can't protect families, how are we going to protect the general public?" A way that we would communicate that is constantly telling the community that we care about domestic violence and sex assault and stalking and human trafficking, all these crimes committed against women, and it also applies to the police family.

And by the way, excuse me for saying this. I don't want this to sound like I am absolutely anti-police. It's just the opposite. I think, to me, dealing with violence in the police family is our big test

of this century. If we can't communicate to the public that we're going to hold our own accountable and make the law keep its promise and protect victims of domestic violence, then we're in trouble.

So it's a challenge for every police chief and every sheriff in this country to make sure that they communicate to the public that my employees are going to be just as safe as you.

[question]In this Internet age, would it not make sense for police departments to have a link on their home page advising potential victims as to what to do? [/question]

... I ask chiefs all the time, how easy is it for a victim to find direct service when they go to your website? Do they see K9 and bomb squad and helicopters, or do they see a button that says, "If you are a victim of sex assault or domestic violence stalking, click here," and it immediately goes to resources?

Because, you know, victims need options. They don't need advice. They know what trouble they're in. They need options, and options should be a part of the very first thing you see when you go to other departments' websites.

[question]Have you ever seen a situation where there is such a button for an abused partner to push to find out where to go? [/question]

There are agencies who on their home page have a button for domestic violence, but it's not uniform. I'd like to see more of it, and we're doing our best to make sure that that message gets out. ...

[question]How did you get interested in this subject? [/question]

I'm a survivor. Even though my relatives were all in law enforcement, my stepfather was an abuser. I lived under an abuser for 10 years.

[question]Abused your mother?[/question]

Oh, yes. It was bad. That's light. "Abuse" is not the right word. My stepfather was a violent offender, and I had this opportunity in the late '50s and early '60s, ... [watching] the police departments all over Texas where we lived deal with domestic violence. They threatened my mother with arrests. They struggled. They had no policies, and you know what happens when you've got people that have got no direction. They make it up as they go. So we were pretty much at the mercy of my stepfather.

[question]So he was an officer?[/question]

No, he wasn't an officer. He was just an abuser. But you've got to make the best of it, I suppose. I learned from him how to police domestic violence, so when I got into law enforcement, I had a pretty clear view of what I needed to do.

When I saw that there was a double standard for law enforcement, I decided that we needed to do something about that, too. That's why I pushed for a specialized unit within our police department, and even today they're still investigating and arresting officers for domestic violence.

...

[question]At some point you left Nashville Police Department. Why, and then what did you do? [/question]

When I made lieutenant, they were going to transfer me back to homicide, and I had already worked in homicide, and I really wanted to sleep. So I had a conversation with my chief about it, and he said, "I need you in homicide," so I decided I that I would leave the agency and do this work.

Since 2001, I've traveled all over the world. I've trained officers in China and Russia and just got back from Brazil, training the Brazilian police, and Georgia and Northern Ireland and England, Germany and all these places I've trained. Plus I've trained in every state in the United States, so I've trained police officers and police chiefs and judges and prosecutors around [the world] all about violence against women in the United States.

It's worked out real well for me. I miss the work in policing, but what I'm doing now, it's meaningful. ...

[question]Does domestic abuse necessarily involve violence? [/question]

It doesn't. I think that a lot of people think that it's slaps and punches and kicks, but it's much more than that. It's social, psychological abuse. It's someone using force and fear to control someone else, to degrade someone down, to push their self-esteem to the lowest level so they can be controlled.

Domestic violence abusers will use all kinds of methods to control their victims, and this is learned behavior. They've been doing it a while. They watched it happen as a child, so they're very sophisticated in what they do. And smart offenders don't often hit or punch. They don't have to. They have other ways of controlling a victim.

[question]At some point you got involved in helping to craft model rules for how police departments should deal with this issue. Tell me how that came about and your involvement in it. [/question]

In '82, '83 I started training in our academy, teaching our recruits, and then shortly after that, our chief introduced me to IACP, which is the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Then in '86, '87 we did a couple of training films for law enforcement, I think one of the first true training films that actually dealt with the correct way to deal with domestic violence. And then I started traveling.

We spent about three years, and we traveled across the United States, talking to police executives about how to write and formulate policies dealing with women and domestic violence. And this was the first real, national training that a lot of these police chiefs had. The chiefs that we were talking to were officers that came on in the late '50s and early '60s — in their mind, domestic violence was more of a dispute. It was a disagreement between a husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend, until you [had a] homicide.

So they weren't really talking about violence against women until the early or mid-80s, and I got involved in that process. And I listened in those years very carefully to police chiefs and some of the excuses that I heard about why we couldn't protect the victims of domestic violence and the general public. And I knew, and the conversations I had with them in those years, that not only were we not protecting the public, but we weren't protecting our own families.

[question]So describe to me the evolution of these rules. You became interested in a policy. How long did it take, and are they still in effect? ...[/question]

In '96, '97 and those years, the IACP put together impact panels around the country to talk about this issue with leaders and police, sheriffs and police, and the IACP devised a nationwide model protocol on how to deal with officer-involved domestic violence. In 2002 and 2003 it was rolled out as a national model.

It's only been 10 years now, and a lot of agencies have adopted it. Some states have a statewide model policy. In Tennessee I managed to work on a statewide policy, so every chief, every sheriff in the state has a model they can go to to replicate for their agency. North Dakota has a statewide policy. A lot of states are looking at a statewide model policy to give their chiefs and sheriffs an example to use. So it's taken a while.

We're starting to see more and more police departments, if they don't have a policy, define how they deal with officer-involved domestic violence, from the first responder to the criminal investigator to the internal affairs investigator. So it's changing, but not nearly as fast as I'd like to see.

[question]Would you like to see every police department in the country adopt the model rules?[/question]

You can't police without it.

[question]And yet there are many that are policing without it.[/question]

I understand that. Let me just say, you cannot police in an open society and — if you lose the public trust, you're in big trouble. In order for us to win the public trust, we have to tell society that we're going to hold our own accountable, and this is the way to do it, by investigating and arresting and prosecuting officers that commit domestic violence in their own families.

[question]... If an officer learns about an allegation of domestic violence involving a fellow officer and does not report it or take action, what should the response by his superiors be, or her superiors?[/question]

It's pretty simple for me. Whenever you are aware of a crime and you don't hold someone accountable, then you're colluding with a criminal. Is that what we want in the ranks of law enforcement? Do we want our officers to collude with a criminal? The answer is obviously no.

A way to make sure that doesn't happen is that we not only say but we promote zero tolerance in the ranks of law enforcement around domestic violence. Because we've seen this play before, where police departments and sheriffs' departments around the country have tolerated domestic violence, and what it got was the death of the spouse of an officer.

We can't tolerate that anymore. The mystery's over. We already know. The studies are over. We know what these offenders will do. We know what they're capable of, because domestic violence offenders not only abuse their family members nationwide, they kill police officers. Four people that I knew, friends, were killed by domestic violence offenders in my city alone.

The very first police officer killed on my police department in 1875 was killed responding to a domestic violence call. One hundred and five years later, I was policing the same streets as that officer was killed on, so when I hear someone say we should tolerate levels of domestic violence, I say you must be out of your mind, because these offenders are not only dangerous to their families, they're dangerous to police officers. ...

[question][Are you seeing a zero-tolerance policy across the country?]/[question]

... We're not there yet, but I think once we get to that level, a lot of things are going to happen for us. First of all, the people who we work for, you the taxpayer, is going to look at their agency with a different eye, that you can trust, you feel comfortable with calling your police department and your sheriff's department, and I think victims will call.

Let me give you one quick example. I was a lieutenant with the Nashville police, and I was in the office one night, and we had just arrested one of our officers for domestic violence. The local media covered it and broadcast it, and the phone rang, and this woman, she said, "Are you Lt. Wynn?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." And she said, "I want to talk to you, but I don't want to give you my name." And of course these things happen. People do that all the time. And I said, "Yes, ma'am, go right ahead." And she said, "I saw on the media today where you arrested one of your officers for domestic violence." I said, "Yes, ma'am, we did." And she said, "I want to thank you for that." And I said, "Why is that?"

She said: "I was married to one of your officers for 30 years, and he beat the hell out of me all the time I was married to him. And I reported it to your police department, and nothing happened." And she said, "Obviously the day has changed, and I want to thank you for holding your own accountable," and she hung the phone up.

That was all I needed to hear, that there were victims, not only presently that were dealing with domestic violence, but there were thousands and thousands of victims in the past who had not had their day in court because of a culture in policing that pushed family members away from protection who were victims of domestic violence.

[question]Let's say an internal affairs department has investigated serious allegations of domestic abuse involving an officer and comes back with the conclusion that that officer should be fired. Should the police chief always uphold the recommendations of, say, an internal affairs department that has looked into domestic violence?[/question]

It's hard to judge an individual case. Obviously as an investigator, I've advised police chiefs on this very thing, to fire police officers. Again, what do you communicate inside the ranks of your agency when you don't have a standard of holding your own accountable? ...

When you raise your hand to take your badge, it's a big deal. It's a life-changing thing for you because of the things you have to accept. Your life changes forever. You have to be willing to risk your life for people you don't know every day. You have to be willing to take a life.

This is serious business, and you're entrusted with the safety of the public. There's nothing more precious than that. And how can we in police leadership turn loose on the public someone who we can't trust to protect your rights? ...

[question]A definition for officer-involved domestic violence? [/question]

We define it as a police officer involved in domestic violence and police officer-involved sex assault and police officer-involved stalking.

We see officers commit the same kind of crimes that the general public commits, but obviously we want the chiefs to put this at a high priority and deal with it through selecting the right officers, training those officers; enforcing, reinforcing in the families that there's an option for the families to come to law enforcement if they need assistance; training our first-line supervisors, our sergeants in the field, supervisors, an early-warning system where they see officers with problems, because sometimes you see other issues can come [up] with officers. Officers who are abusive to the public can sometimes also be abusive to their family members.

So we're not wide-eyed about this. We know now after all these years that we hire people, and sometimes they bring violence with them. How do we keep that out is the true test of a police leader today.

[question]Can you cite some specifics in the model rules that you believe are the most important for police chiefs and departments to follow?[/question]

... With domestic violence cases, we should certainly look at the past and how we dealt with it in the past and correct those mistakes. We should look at it presently. How are we dealing with it

today? How do we train our officers, select our officers, train our supervisors? How do we train our dispatchers? How do we train our civilian employees in law enforcement? Is there a standard in the department?

And the future is that if we have zero tolerance and we broadcast that zero tolerance and we change the culture in policing that says we're not going to tolerate violence in our police families, then the future will take care of itself. Then people will come to us who want to work in an environment that's nonviolent, and we'll have a healthier criminal justice/law enforcement system in the United States.

[question]Is this issue that we're talking about really just an internal affairs issue?[/question]

It's something I've heard a lot of, that this is just an internal affair. In my mind it's an external affair. That's why some of the more progressive police departments have an internal track investigation that starts and an external track, because we're talking about crime here, crime committed outside the agency against another family member. So this is absolutely external, and in my mind there's no difference [from] the general public where domestic violence is committed.

...

[question]Could you talk a little about the difficulties and the challenges involved in a law enforcement agency investigating one of its own? If the police officer is your abuser, who do you call? You call the police. Is that a problem?[/question]

I think the average number of officers per police department nationwide is like, five to eight officers, and sometimes agencies aren't capable of investigating their own, so what we recommend is they collaborate with other agencies and create memorandums of understanding [MOU] that they'll come in and investigate an allegation of domestic violence against their own.

That seems to work pretty well, because the smaller your agency is, the harder it is to find someone who doesn't personally know and is a friend of the person who's been accused of the domestic violence. So that's a method that seems to work.

But there are challenges; there's no question about it. ... But it's not impossible. And we want police chiefs to understand that there is that extra burden on officers to investigate, but the price is too high not to.

[question]Is there a propensity then to sort of close ranks in a way within law enforcement?[/question]

There has been in the past a tendency to close ranks. But the problem with this is it's not like it's a single incident. Domestic violence — one of the common characteristics is it's an ongoing course of conduct. Offenders don't just do it once. They've done it many times.

Crisis lines will tell you that victims will call the crisis line for the first time on average after the fifth

assault. ... So we're putting that victim in imminent danger if we don't hold the officer-offender accountable. ...

[question]... Where is the accountability in this? Where does the buck stop? [/question]

The accountability rests with the chief law enforcement executive in every community. It's her or his responsibility to make sure that domestic violence laws are enforced in the public and in police families.

[question]What if those individuals don't enforce those laws? What's to be done? [/question]

It's obvious. Do you want people who supervise and run and manage your law enforcement in your community that you pay for, do you want them to ignore domestic violence in a police family?

[question]So in other words, you're saying the elected officials have a responsibility to remove the police chief?[/question]

Absolutely. What's amazing to me is we're having this conversation at all. I mean, could you imagine us sitting here talking about this and saying, how do you feel about officers using crack before they go to work, or how do you feel about the officer who every once in a while just robs a bank, or every once in a while decides to go in and steal a car from a dealership? We wouldn't have this conversation.

Why is it that we've taken violence against women and separated that from other crimes? And that's the bigger question, I think, for society. ...

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