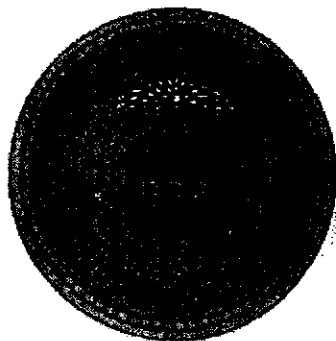


BUCKS COUNTY  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FATALITY  
REVIEW COMMISSION

FINAL REPORT  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MARCH 6, 2008



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## **DEDICATION**

The members of the Commission wish to acknowledge the strength and courage demonstrated by each family member and friend of the murdered victims, Mary Claire Alessandroni, Susan Czarny, Suzanne Detwiler and Robin Shaffer.

Finally, the Commission is dedicating this report and its recommendations to the loving memories of Mary Claire Alessandroni, Susan Czarny, Suzanne Detwiler and Robin Shaffer.

## INTRODUCTION

During a six month period (April 22, 2005 to October 7, 2005), there was a series of domestic abuse related homicides resulting in the deaths of twelve people in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

The sheer volume of deaths in such a short period, as well as the fact that they occurred in areas and among families that are not perceived as high risk by the general community, were catalysts for action. In response to the shock and concern felt by representatives of County systems and the public, in October 2005 the District Attorney convened the Bucks County Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission. The Commission chose to review four domestic abuse related cases that involved the deaths of eight people. All four cases were closed prior to the review. The Commission understood that they might not be able to draw any conclusions from these four homicides. However, it was the hope of the Commission that some common trends would emerge.

## **MISSION**

The mission of the Bucks County Fatality Review Commission is to prevent deaths from intimate relationship violence by utilizing a systematic confidential, multi-agency review process, and to identify system gaps in order to expand effective violence prevention and coordination strategies. This multi-agency review shall make recommendations for systems change, in order to prevent future deaths from intimate relationship violence.

## **COMPOSITION OF THE COMMISSION**

The Bucks County Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission consists of a locally based, multi-disciplinary panel of professionals to conduct the in-depth review of the domestic abuse fatalities. These professionals represented Bensalem Township Police Department, Bucks County Adult Probation and Parole, Bucks County Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, A Woman's Place, Network of Victim Assistance, Raven Hill Psychological Services, Pennridge Regional Police Department, Solebury Township Police Department, Quakertown Borough Police Department, Warminster Township Police Department, Bucks County District Attorney's Office, Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania Bucks Division, Bensalem Township Police Department's Domestic Violence Manager, and private attorneys.

## REVIEW PROCESS

Over a period of a year and a half, the Bucks County Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission met monthly in order to review each of the four domestic abuse cases. The Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission requested all records related to the individuals involved, including Protection From Abuse Orders, court records, law enforcement incident reports, and the homicide investigation. Each police department presented the information about the fatality that occurred in their jurisdiction, and any background information. The Commission invited identified surviving family members, friends and co-workers to provide any additional information. Commission members read the information provided from the various agencies and examined their own agency's records for contacts with the victim, the perpetrator, or the children.

In the Commission's search for knowledge and information regarding contact and services provided to victims and/or perpetrators, confidentiality constraints prevented some members and outside agencies from providing reports, records or contact information. While it did not prevent the review, it limited the information which might have been helpful in the outcome and recommendations of the Commission.

For the purposes of this review the Commission defines a domestic violence fatality as a death which arises from an abuser's efforts to seek power and control over their intimate partner. Using this definition, domestic violence fatalities include:

- a. All homicides in which the victim was the current or former intimate partner of the perpetrator;
- b. Homicides occurring as an extension of or in response to ongoing partner abuse;
- c. Suicides which occur in the context of intimate partner violence.