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## **Domestic Violence Unit created to help abuse victims get quick protection**



*SPRINGFIELD, Mo.* –Domestic violence is an epidemic in the United States, as millions of Americans experience intimate partner violence each year. According to statistics kept by the Missouri State Highway Patrol, Greene County has the third-highest rate of domestic violence incidents in the State of Missouri.

In an effort to address the prevalence of these incidents, the Greene County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Patterson created a new unit dedicated to prosecuting cases of domestic assault, violations of orders of protection, stalking, and harassment.

Formed in January 2022, the Domestic Violence Unit (DVU) specifically focuses on these cases, and the assistant prosecutors assigned to DVU are trained to analyze the unique factors that impact a domestic violence case. Domestic violence crimes can be some of the most difficult for victims to identify and report, as an abuser often has control over the victim's home, finances, and everyday activities. Social stigma also adds to the difficulty of these cases, as victims may feel ashamed to come forward about the violence they have endured at home. Because of the dynamics of these relationships, victims are often reluctant to separate from their abuser, and are also hesitant to assist in prosecution.

Emily Shook, a First Assistant Prosecuting Attorney and the head of DVU, wants Greene County residents to understand that domestic violence is extremely serious, and can happen to anyone.

“People assume they don't know a domestic violence victim,” Shook said. “They associate it with gender or socioeconomic status, but domestic violence is very prevalent in Greene County. It's very likely we all know someone who's been abused.”

Shook says abuse can take on many different forms, some more recognizable than others. Offenses like domestic assault, violations of orders of protection, stalking, and harassment are some of the most common ones submitted for review. Her unit sees a lot of choking and strangulation cases, which are some of the most dangerous. According to the Training Institute of Strangulation Prevention, a single incident of strangulation makes that abuser 750 percent more likely to eventually kill that victim.

The unique and serious dynamics of domestic violence cases led the Greene County Prosecuting Attorney's Office to adopt new techniques to effectively file cases and assist victims. Each week, the assistant prosecutors in DVU take turns staffing the Family Justice Center (FJC), and take responsibility for evaluating and charging all the domestic violence cases that are referred by law enforcement that week. The DVU attorneys understand that time is of the essence in evaluating these cases.

“We want to be victim-centered and offender-focused,” said Shook. “The longer you wait, the more likely a family's circumstances change. To keep victims protected from a very violent situation, we file cases quickly and limit offenders by imposing conditions of release.” Some common conditions include restricting contact with the victim, prohibiting use of controlled substances, limiting the times of day an offender can travel, or restricting access to weapons.

The DVU is one part of the efforts of the FJC to meet the needs of victims seeking assistance. The attorney stationed at the FJC each week has the opportunity to not only meet with victims,

but also connect them with other partner agencies to engage in therapy, obtain legal aid to file for divorce or an order of protection, seek housing assistance, and more.

Shook says if a victim needs support or wants assistance making a plan to safely escape an abusive relationship, they should reach out to the FJC. “Domestic violence dynamics create complicated and difficult situations for victims,” she said.

Criminal prosecution is one way we can help protect families in our community and prevent injuries and domestic homicides. Forming the DVU has intensified efforts toward timely review of referrals and improved contact with victims of domestic violence. Partnerships between prosecutors and other agencies at the FJC can help victims determine the best ways to move forward.

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*Greene County is the State of Missouri’s fourth most populous county, serving approximately 295,000 people. Its mission is to provide all citizens of Greene County, including those in its cities, a safe and thriving community through excellent customer service, unparalleled dedication, and the efficient use of taxpayer dollars. The Greene County Commission is the executive body of Greene County operating under guidelines established in the Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri. Within that authority the Commission enacts ordinances, resolutions and policies, supervises the activities of county departments, fixes salaries, adopts the annual budget, provides for construction and other services, and conducts hearings on planning and zoning matters.*

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