

2020 ANNUAL DATA REPORT:

Sexual & Domestic
Violence in Whatcom
County

Published: September 2021
Data Period: 2020*

*This is the most recent year for which cross-discipline data is available



COMMISSION
ON SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is “pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to gain power and control over the other. Abuse is not caused by anger, mental problems, alcohol or other drugs, or other common excuses. **It is caused by one person’s belief that they have the right to control their partner.**”¹

Sexual assault (SA) “occurs when a person is forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into any unwanted sexual activity. [It] is an umbrella term that includes a wide range of victimizations which may or may not involve force or be illegal.”² Sexual assault or sexual abuse often appears in domestic

violence relationships. In fact, it has been estimated that **two-thirds of survivors** experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) **have been sexually assaulted by their abusive partner.**

In 2018, as part of our efforts to acknowledge this intersection, the Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission on Sexual and Domestic Violence (the Commission) changed our name and expanded our mission to include addressing sexual assault.

Our Mission: The Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence inspires and coordinates our community’s efforts to address domestic and sexual violence.

To fulfill this vital mission, we:

- **Foster** safety, justice, and well-being for survivors and communities.
- **Connect** institutions, stakeholders, and communities to collectively increase understanding and effectiveness of community responses for sexual and domestic violence.
- **Transform** systems to ensure best practice prevention and responses for sexual and domestic violence.



¹ <https://wscadv.org/about-domestic-violence/>; infographic from WSCADV.

² <https://www.wcsap.org/help/about-sexual-assault/what-sexual-assault>

Background & Purpose of the Data Report

When the Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission Against Domestic Violence was created in 1998, one of the functions was to develop community benchmarks for monitoring domestic violence and to prepare an annual report to share throughout the community. Although this data cannot illustrate a full picture of the prevalence or impacts of domestic and sexual violence in our community, we share this data to provide key indicators on the scope of these issues locally. The 2019 Interlocal Agreement between Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham expanded the purpose of the annual data report to include input from survivors, assessing strengths and gaps of institutional responses. **We**

know that survivor voices must inform our work. In 2019 the Commission adopted a Survivor Input policy to ensure that themes and experiences from survivor interviews, focus groups, and surveys were included in our annual data report to help guide community efforts.

The data in the Snapshot Report is just that—a snapshot of what domestic and sexual violence look like in our community. It cannot represent a comprehensive view but is an important piece of the puzzle. We encourage the community to find ways to learn from and leverage this data.

What can you learn from this data? How can you apply this information within your own agency or system?

Sexual and domestic violence are common in our community. In Washington State, 41% of women and 31% of men experience physical violence, sexual violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.³ Domestic violence includes other controlling behaviors, so likely even more people are impacted. One in five women and one in 71 men are raped in their lifetime, but less than 40% of sexual assaults are reported to police.⁴ But you can play a role in ensuring that survivors receive the support they need when they reach out. Healthcare providers, schools, churches, employers, family members, and friends can all offer resources, listening, and care.

We encourage you to explore this year's Spotlight Report to learn more deeply about the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on survivors and for recommendations for addressing domestic and sexual violence within your agency. **All systems and individuals in our community can be part of fostering safety, justice, and well-being for survivors.**

³ https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/washington_fc_revised.pdf

⁴ https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf

Snapshot Report: Sexual & Domestic Violence in Whatcom County

Law Enforcement Calls for Service

Sexual Assault as reported by WASPC

According to the Washington Association of Sheriffs & Police Chiefs' (WASPC) *Crime in Washington 2020 Annual Report*⁵, **in 2020 there were 130 reports of sexual assault offenses to Whatcom County's law enforcement agencies** (excluding Lummi Tribal Police).⁶ This total is roughly equal to the 2019 total reported by WASPC of **138** reports of sexual offenses in Whatcom County.

SEXUAL ASSAULT OFFENSES 2019 vs 2020, as reported by WASPC																
	BPD		Blaine		Everson		Ferndale		Lynden		Sumas		WCSO		WWU	
	'19	'20	'19	'20	'19	'20	'19	'20	'19	'20	'19	'20	'19	'20	'19	'20
Rape	32	29	2	1	0	0	12	1	4	10	1	0	30	25	1	1
Sodomy ⁷	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	4	0	0
Fondling	14	14	1	4	0	0	4	2	1	5	0	0	18	21	0	0
Incest	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	0	0
Statutory Rape	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	2	1	0	0
Peeping Tom	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	54	47	3	6	0	0	17	3	7	17	1	0	55	56	1	1

Table 1

Bellingham Police Department also uses an additional category: "sex crime investigations." In 2020, **93 cases were classified as sex crime investigations, down from 125 in 2019**. BPD categorizes a report as sex crime investigation when the patrol officer believes that further investigation is needed to determine what if any crime occurred. This category can also include reports that came to BPD through a third party such as the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, but was later determined that the event did not occur in BPD's jurisdiction, or there was no disclosure from the child. The anonymous Sexual Assault Kits (evidence collected at sexual assault exams) are also included in this category.

⁵ <https://www.waspc.org/crime-statistics-reports>

⁶ These totals do NOT include reports to Lummi Tribal Police because numbers from that agency were not included in the WASPC Report. Please see next page for data from Lummi Tribal Police. Nooksack Tribal Police refers all sexual assault offenses to the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office (WCSO), so those numbers are included in WCSO data.

⁷ In Washington State, the term "sodomy" is used to report sex crimes where the perpetrator is the same gender as the victim. The terminology for crime statistics used by the WASPC is determined by FBI reporting categories. You can visit this resource to learn more about how Washington State RCWs relate to the categories set forth by the FBI: <https://www.waspc.org/assets/CJIS/trainingmanualsandreference/nibrsexoffensegrid.pdf>. The Commission recognizes the historic and current use of "sodomy laws" to criminalize consensual relationships between members of the LGBTQ+ community. To learn more visit: <https://www.aclu.org/other/why-sodomy-laws-matter>

Sexual Assault as reported by individual agencies

Depending on the agency's capacity and record management system, some Whatcom County law enforcement agencies were able to provide more detailed information about reports of sexual violence in 2020. This data is a starting point. In future annual data reports, the Commission hopes to include more agencies and look at trends over time. These numbers may not match the data reported in the WASPC *Crime in Washington 2020 Annual Report* due to differing classifications between legal definitions in the State of Washington and how the FBI classifies offenses (see footnote 5 on the previous page). These numbers do not include data from the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office.

	BPD	Blaine	Ferndale	Lummi	Lynden	Sumas	WWU	Total
Rape (no degree specified)					8			8
Rape - 1st degree	0		0	3		0		3
Rape - 2nd degree	12		0	5		0		17
Rape - 3rd degree	14		0	2		0		16
Sex Crime Investigation (BPD ONLY)	93							93
Sex Crime (No Rape)				9	7			16
Anonymous Rape Kit	15		1				0	16
Rape of a Child (no degree specified)					3			3
Rape of a Child - 1st degree	4		1	1				6
Rape of a Child - 2nd degree	4		0			0		4
Rape of a Child - 3rd degree	5	2	0	1				8
Child Molestation	5		3					8
Indecent Liberties	7		1	1		0		9
Incest	1		2	1				4
Sexual Misconduct w/minor	1		0				0	1
ICAC (child pornography)	31		2				0	33
Voyeurism	6		1	0			0	7
Sex Offender Registration	103		0	100			0	203
Sex Offender Address Verification	126		6	42	26	1	0	201
Fail to Register (Sex Offender)	2		1	11			0	14

Table 2

Forensic Exams

In 2020 PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center performed **116 forensic medical exams** (including sexual assault exams, domestic violence exams, and consults). This includes **90 sexual assault forensic exams**, of which 30 were child sexual assault examinations for children 12 and younger. The remaining sexual assault exams were for adults and adolescents aged 13 and above. Of those 116 exams, **9 were domestic violence forensic exams.**

Of those sexual assaults and domestic violence incidents where the survivor sought a forensic exam:

- **93 occurred in Whatcom County:**
 - 58 occurred in Bellingham
 - 13 occurred in unincorporated Whatcom County
 - 10 occurred on Lummi Reservation
 - 6 occurred in Ferndale
 - 3 occurred in Blaine
 - 2 occurred in Lynden
 - 1 occurred in Sumas
- 17 of those survivors chose to have an anonymous kit collected
- 14 occurred in Skagit County

Not all survivors who come to St. Joseph Medical Center for an exam get evidence collected, per their choice. Some survivors choose to get only sexually transmitted infection prophylaxis and laboratory testing.

Law Enforcement Calls for Service

Domestic Violence

In 2020 there were **3,104 domestic violence** calls for service to Whatcom County's law enforcement agencies⁸. Of these calls for service, there were **1,772** incidents that did NOT result in an arrest (**57%**) and **1,332** domestic violence offenses where at least one party was arrested (**43%**). Incidents that do not result in an arrest are sometimes referred to as "DV verbals" or "domestic disputes." In those calls for service, police determine that the legal definition of domestic violence had not been met.

In Washington State, RCW 26.50.010 defines domestic violence as **"Physical harm, bodily injury, assault, or the infliction of fear of imminent physical harm, bodily injury or assault, sexual assault, or stalking..."** of an intimate partner, or family or household member⁹.

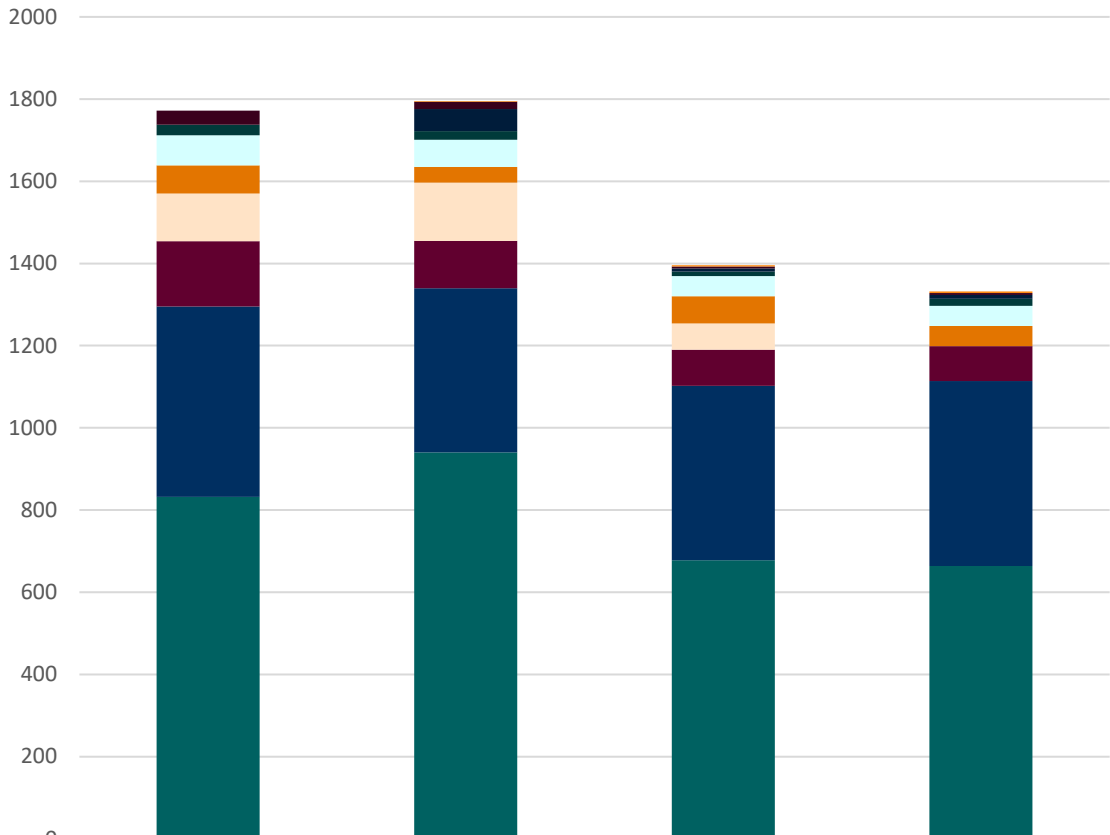
This means that **even in those calls where no arrest was made, an abusive person could have still caused harm to a survivor** because the tactics used to establish power and control are harmful, even when they are not illegal.

While some law enforcement agencies had increases or decreases in offenses and non-arrest calls (see Figure 2 on next page), **the totals for all of Whatcom County, and the percentages of arrest vs. non-arrest calls, are remarkably similar to 2019.** In 2019, there were 3,127 total domestic violence calls for service, 1,795 non-arrest calls (57%) and 1,332 offenses (43%).

⁸ Data collected from [WASPC Crime in Washington 2020 Annual Report](#) and individual law enforcement agencies. These numbers do NOT include non-arrest DV calls to Everson Police Department or Western Washington University Police Department.

⁹ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=26.50.010>

2019 & 2020 DV Non-Arrest Calls & Offenses



	Non-Arrest Calls 2020	Non-Arrest Calls 2019	Offenses (crime occurred) 2020	Offenses (crime occurred) 2019
WWU		1	3	4
Sumas	34	18	5	5
Everson		54	8	9
Nooksack	26	21	11	17
Lynden	73	66	49	49
Blaine	69	38	66	49
Lummi	116	142	64	
Ferndale	159	115	88	85
WCSO	463	400	424	450
Bellingham	832	940	678	664

■ Bellingham
 ■ WCSO
 ■ Ferndale
 ■ Lummi
 ■ Blaine
 ■ Lynden
 ■ Nooksack
 ■ Everson
 ■ Sumas
 ■ WWU

Figure 1

Please Note: Blank portions of the chart indicate that those agencies did not provide that data to the DV Commission.

Protection Orders

In 2020 there were a total of **206 requests for temporary orders** of protection against domestic violence and sexual assault in Whatcom District and Superior Courts.¹⁰ Of those requests, approximately:

- **58%** (120) were granted (became temporary orders)
- **32%** (67) became permanent orders

Temporary protection orders prohibit the **respondent** (typically the offender) from contacting or approaching the **petitioner** (typically the survivor) in the two-week period preceding the court hearing for a permanent order. **Permanent orders** typically last one year, although Judicial Officers have the authority to grant protections for shorter or longer periods of time. **Violations** of temporary or permanent orders can result in criminal charges and/or jail time. Reporting violations is the responsibility of the petitioner.

Approval rates of permanent orders were generally lower in 2020 than 2019:

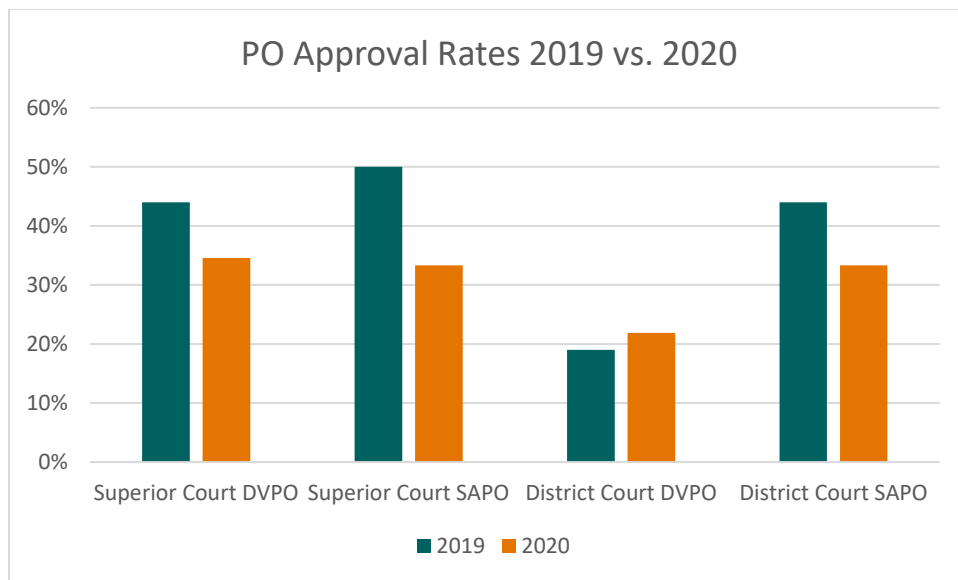


Figure 2

¹⁰ Lummi and Nooksack Tribal Courts were not able to provide this detailed data on their protection order applications

Of the **67 permanent protection orders** granted in Whatcom County District and Superior Courts in 2020, approximately:

- **94% (63)** were Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs)
- **6% (4)** were Sexual Assault Protection Orders (SAPOs)

In 2021, the Washington State Legislature passed **HB 1320 “Modernizing, harmonizing, and improving the efficacy and accessibility of laws concerning civil protection orders.”** This bill will create one form to petition for all protection orders (with the exception of Extreme Risk Protection Orders), allow petitioners to file remotely, changes the requirement that “fear or harm be imminent,” and allows parties to appear remotely for hearings at the discretion of the court.¹¹ The section of the law related to remote hearings has already taken effect.

¹¹ For more information, see the [Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence Legislative Summary](#) and the [full bill](#).

Community & Tribal-Based Advocacy Services

Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services of Whatcom

County (DVSAS) served a total of **1,284** unduplicated clients in 2020. **1,076** of those clients were survivors of domestic violence and **279** were survivors of sexual assault or commercial sexual exploitation (SE) in 2020. Those totals add to more than 1,284 because some of those clients received services for both domestic violence and sexual assault. In the same year, **94** clients utilized DVSAS' safe shelter services. **850** students in Whatcom County received education on consent and healthy relationships.

The number of clients served went down from 2019, when about 850 more individuals were served. This may have been due to many survivors of domestic violence being isolated at home with their abusive partner and thus unable to call for support; closure of walk-in services at the downtown DVSAS office; or survivors' focus on other urgent needs: safety from COVID, unemployment, financial and housing insecurity, childcare challenges, and others. See Figure 3 on the next page for a comparison of the number of clients serviced in 2019 compared to 2020.

DVSAS services are available for anyone impacted by domestic violence, sexual assault, or sexual exploitation. **DVSAS services include:**

IMMEDIATE HELP	ONGOING SUPPORT	SAFE HOUSING	EDUCATION PROGRAM
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 24-hour helpline• 24-hour forensic exam support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advocacy counseling• Legal advocacy• Support groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confidential shelter• Homelessness prevention services• Housing case management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Empowerment Project: 3-session prevention program for middle & high school students

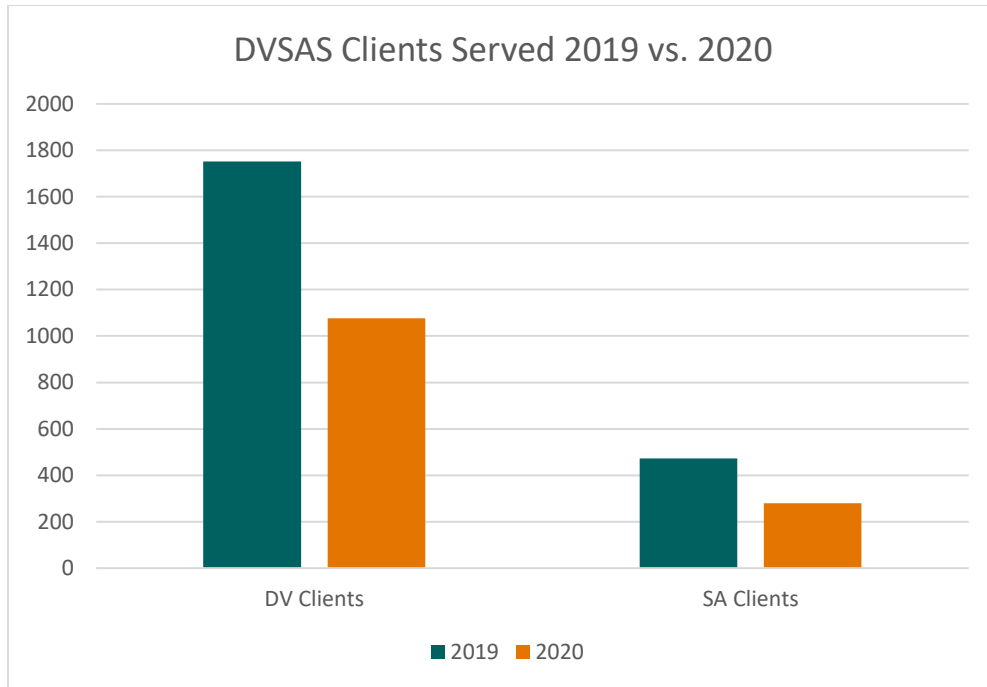


Figure 3

CASAS Survivor Advocacy at Western Washington University (WWU) served **89 students** impacted by domestic violence and sexual harassment or assault in 2020. This includes those directly impacted as well as secondary survivors (friends or family of survivors). This number was **a significant drop from 2019**, when **180** students were served.

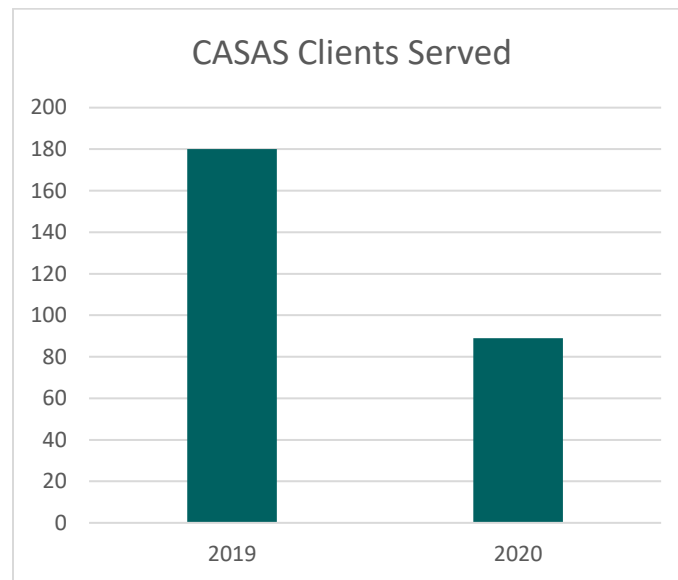


Figure 4

Though data is not available on the specific reasons, **the drop was likely due to COVID-19** and responses to the pandemic:

- Many first year students opted to or needed to live at home. Historically, there are higher rates of sexual violence in the first few weeks/months of a school year and newer students experience violence at higher rates.
- It may also be possible that students were having fewer intimate relationships due to social distancing and remote learning.
- Students who experienced domestic violence may not have been able to access services while living at home with their family or partner.
- Students may not have been aware that services usually provided on-campus were available virtually. CASAS was able to provide more ongoing advocacy support due to the decrease in new clients seeking support.

CASAS helps any Western Washington University student affected by sexual harassment, sexual assault, relationship violence, or stalking recently or in the past.¹² **CASAS services include:**

ADVOCACY & SUPPORT

- Support groups
- Reporting options
- Academic support
- Confidential 1-on-1 support
- Sessions with advocate
- Protection orders

REFERRAL & INFORMATION

- Medical assistance
- Legal assistance
- Financial aid solutions
- Housing solutions
- Emergency leave
- Counseling referrals

Lummi Victims of Crime (LVOC) provides help to any adult or adolescent within Lummi Nation who has been affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, assault & battery, survivor of homicide, child abuse, and sexual assault.¹³ LVOC was not able to provide data on the number of clients served in 2020. **LVOC services include:**

CRISIS COUNSELING

- In-person or via telephone
- 24-hour hotline
- Safety planning and information
- On-scene advocacy for DV and SA crimes

LEGAL ADVOCACY

- Court hearings
- Protection and restraining orders

TRANSPORTATION & REFERRALS

- Therapy referrals – sweats, smudges
- Traditional healing
- Transportation to medical, legal, and therapy appointments

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTER

- Ne-Alis Tokw (My Sister's Place)

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

- Replacement of house door locks and car windshields, broken due to DV incidents
- Boarding up house windows broken due to DV incidents

EDUCATION

- Teen Girls groups
- Free annual conferences
- Annual Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Awareness Walk

¹² <https://pws.wvu.edu/consultation-and-sexual-assault-support-casas>

¹³ <https://www.lummi-nsn.gov/Website.php?PageID=399>

Tl'ils Ta'á'altha Victims of Crime Program served **9** survivors of domestic violence and **1** survivor of sexual assault in 2020. This new Victims of Crime program, a program of the Nooksack Indian Tribe, started in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic.

The mission of Tl'ils Ta'á'altha program “is to **provide relief and support to community members who have suffered physical, emotional, or financial abuse as a result of domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or elder abuse; or who have otherwise been victimized.**”¹⁴

CRISIS COUNSELING	LEGAL ADVOCACY	EMERGENCY HOUSING & ASSISTANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person or via telephone • 24-hour hotline • Safety planning and danger assessment • Active listening and support • Information and referral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attorney assistance with: protection orders, divorce or legal separation, spousal and child support, child custody, and visitation in state or tribal court • Cooperation with law enforcement to assist participants and dependents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hotel/Motel vouchers for participants and their dependents • 24-hour emergency transportation

¹⁴ <https://nooksacktribe.org/departments/youth-family-services/tlils-taaaltha-victims-of-crime-program/>

Lethality Assessment Program (LAP)

The **Lethality Assessment Program (LAP)** was developed by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence and is based on the research of **Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell**. Dr. Campbell's work showed that women killed by their intimate partners had very seldom been engaged by advocates.

When a law enforcement officer responds to a domestic call, the LAP protocol directs them to:

1. Conduct an **11-item lethality screen** with the victim.
2. If the victim screens in at high risk of lethality, the officer makes **immediate contact** with the local domestic violence advocacy agency. In our community, this agency is DVSAS.
3. The victim is then encouraged, but not required, to speak with the domestic violence advocate. The responding officer and the domestic violence advocate work as partners to provide the victim with **safety planning** and resource information.

Connecting survivors to advocacy services makes a difference: In a study of domestic violence homicides in 11 U.S. cities, **only 4% of domestic violence homicide victims had used a domestic violence hotline or shelter within the year prior to being killed** by an intimate partner.¹⁶

The LAP program was initiated in all Whatcom County law enforcement jurisdictions in **2014**. Since that time, there has been an overall **downward trend in the percentage of high-risk victims connected with advocacy on-scene** (see Figure 5 on the next page). At the time of writing, we do not have enough information to identify a specific cause for this decline. **This is an area that deserves further attention and analysis.**

¹⁵ Lethality Assessment Program: The Maryland Model brochure

¹⁶ <https://lethalityassessmentprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/lap-public-stats-memo.pdf>

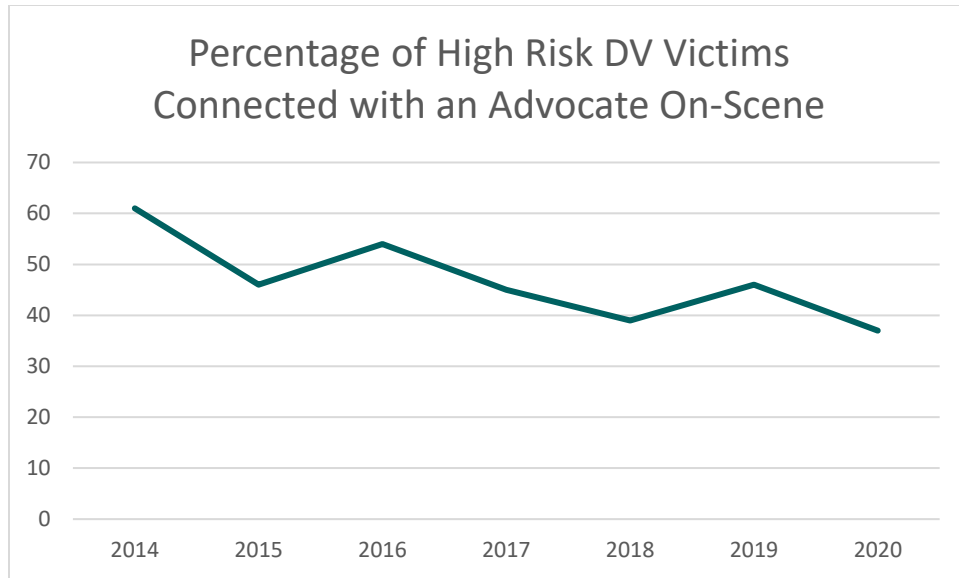
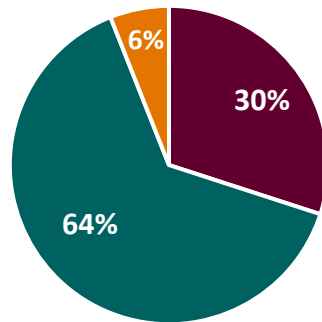


Figure 5

In 2020:

- **Whatcom County** law enforcement agencies conducted the LAP with **352** survivors of domestic violence.
- **64% (225 victims) screened in as at high-risk for lethality** (see Figure 6 on next page). 214 victims screened in according to the LAP Protocol. 11 screened in according to the officer’s belief that the victim was in danger.
- Of these high-risk survivors, **37% spoke to an advocate** for safety planning during the initial law enforcement response (see Figure 7 on next page).
- For the **more than half of high-risk survivors who were NOT connected with an advocate at the scene** we have limited information about why this was the case. Some officers wrote notes about why the survivor was not connected, such as “wanted to follow up later with an advocate,” “didn’t want to talk to DVSAS,” or “victim already in contact w/ DVSAS,” but for the majority of these forms, we do not know why the survivor was not connected to an advocate at the scene. Of the LAP forms that showed a survivor screened in as “high risk,” **12% did not provide further information** about whether the survivor was connected to an advocate at the scene, so though we cannot assume they were not connected we also cannot assume that they were connected or given resources.

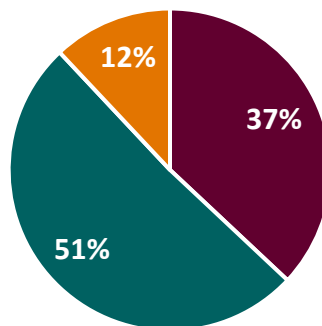
DV Victims Screened by Law Enforcement as High Risk in Whatcom County in 2020



■ Did not screen as high risk ■ Screened as high risk ■ Declined to respond to screening

Figure 6

High Risk Victims Connected with On-Scene Advocacy in Whatcom County in 2020



■ Connected with Advocacy ■ NOT connected ■ Unknown--Field Left Blank

Figure 7

A greater percentage of survivors screened in as high risk in 2020 (64%) compared to 2019 (59%), **but a lower percentage of those at high-risk were connected with advocacy** on-scene (46% in 2019 compared to only 37% in 2020).

Domestic Violence High-Risk Team (DVHRT)

The Domestic Violence High Risk Team (DVHRT) is a multidisciplinary model designed to enhance our community’s response to intimate partner violence offenders who pose the greatest risk committing lethal or near-lethal assault.

The DVHRT focuses on examining risk factors and behaviors of offenders, identifying offenders who are at-risk for committing homicide or seriously injuring someone, and creating monitoring plans across disciplines to deter or minimize future assaults.

The purpose of the DVHRT is to:

- **Facilitate early identification** of the most dangerous domestic violence offenders through research-based risk assessment.
- **Establish clear channels of communication** across all disciplines involved in responding to domestic violence.
- **Provide coordinated, multi-disciplinary responses** to highly lethal domestic violence cases.

Core members of the DVHRT include representatives from:

Law Enforcement

Parole

Prosecution

Batterers’ Intervention

Victim Advocacy

Child Protective Services

Probation

Other Community Partners
(invited to participate, as needed)

In 2020:

- **0** domestic violence offenders were accepted for monitoring by the DVHRT. Due to the pandemic, DVHRT did not meet for part of 2020 which may have impacted the number of offenders accepted for monitoring. There were **12** offenders accepted for monitoring in 2019.
- **47** domestic violence offenders were actively monitored by the DVHRT for all or part of the year, compared to **55** in 2019.

Domestic Violence & Homelessness

For the 2020 Whatcom County Point-in-Time Count census of Homeless Residents, conducted in January 2020, prior to the pandemic, **23%** of respondents experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity **identified domestic violence as one of the reasons they were homeless.**¹⁷ This figure is comparable to the 22% who identified domestic violence as a reason in 2019.

In 2020, **50% of young adults (18-24)** who utilized the young adult housing programs with Northwest Youth Services shared that they **had experienced domestic violence** at some point, and **16% reported that they were fleeing domestic violence.**

Prosecution

Beginning with data from 2020, the Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence will now collect data from local Prosecutors' offices, as available. As we collect data from 2021 and beyond, we will be able to provide analysis and review trends over time. Please see next year's Snapshot Report for those data sets.

¹⁷ *A Home for Everyone: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness 2020 Annual Report* https://www.opcco.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Whatcom-2020-homeless-count-report-_081920_UPDATED-FINAL.pdf



**Spotlight Report:
The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on
Survivors in Whatcom County**

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Survivors in Whatcom County

Introduction

Research Question

For this year's Spotlight Report, the Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted survivors of sexual violence and intimate partner violence, as well as how it has impacted practitioners who work with survivors in our community.

We were interested in:

- How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted survivors' experiences of sexual violence and/or violence in a relationship
- How the pandemic impacted survivors' access to and experience with services and support
- How the pandemic impacted survivors' access to justice
- How the pandemic and responses to the pandemic impacted experiences of service providers

We also asked about:

- safety and health concerns
- economic impacts (like loss of income, unemployment, and housing concerns), and
- other impacts (like stay-at-home orders, being an essential worker, school closures, and not seeing family and friends)

Methodology

The Commission conducted two online surveys in June and July 2021 through the Commission website. The survey questions were mostly open-ended to welcome a variety of input. People who self-identified as having experienced sexual or domestic violence in Whatcom County during the COVID-19 pandemic, or who sought help for sexual or domestic violence in Whatcom County during

the COVID-19 pandemic were eligible to complete the survivor survey. Practitioners who worked with people impacted by sexual or domestic violence in Whatcom County during the COVID-19 pandemic were eligible to complete the practitioner survey.

Additionally, Commission staff conducted semi-structured interviews with survivors, either because the survivor preferred to provide input outside of the survey, or in addition to their survey responses.

Themes were identified by coding survey responses and interview notes and noting trends in responses.

Not all input is directly related to the pandemic and responses to the pandemic, but the themes reflect challenges survivors were likely already having and that are likely to happen again, even when the COVID crisis eventually wanes.

Background

In our own community and across the globe, survivors simultaneously experienced the epidemics of COVID-19 and gender-based violence.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, said that the isolation domestic violence survivors were experiencing during the pandemic is “a perfect storm for controlling, violent behaviour behind closed doors” and noted the negative impact of limited access to helplines, police, courts, and other services.¹⁸

Across the United States, the pandemic has further exposed and deepened disparities. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Americans have died of COVID at higher rates, are more likely to be essential workers and therefore at increased risk of exposure, *and* Black and Latinx women have experienced more unemployment than other groups.¹⁹ A study conducted by [Me Too](#) and [Free From](#) highlighted the impact of economic abuse and economic disparities for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. The study found that among essential workers, **survivors of color were much more likely to experience food, housing, and economic insecurity than white survivors.**²⁰ They also found that survivors who

¹⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

¹⁹ <https://metoomvmt.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Identifying-the-Economic-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Survivors-of-Color-1.97MB-1.pdf>

²⁰ *Ibid* p. 16

shared they would likely return to an abusive partner “had fewer than half the financial resources on average than women who reported no likelihood of returning to an abusive partner.”²¹

In a Free From report on their project of cash grants to survivors of intimate partner violence, the organization reported that “96% of survivors reported experiencing economic abuse.”²² This report

also identified that **even pre-pandemic, survivors were financially**

insecure. The survivors assisted through this project identified “four key ways in which the financial impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated their experiences of abuse:

1. Escalating Violence
2. Fewer financial resources, making it harder to get or stay safe
3. Theft of stimulus checks and other COVID-19-related assistance
4. Slowed court proceedings keeping survivors in contact with harm-doers and delaying potential income like child support”²³

StrongHearts Native Helpline, “a culturally-appropriate, anonymous, confidential service dedicated to serving Native American and Alaska Native survivors of domestic, dating and sexual violence and concerned relatives and friends” noted in their 2020 Year-End Report that “Domestic violence looks

different in every situation and Covid-19 added another tool to an abuser’s toolbox. **Any external factors that add isolation, financial strain, or stress can create circumstances where a survivor’s safety is further compromised—this pandemic had elements of all three.**”²⁴

The National Domestic Violence Hotline initially saw a decrease in call volume compared to the same month in 2019, but by the end of 2020 they had received 9% more contacts than in 2019.²⁵

COVID infections disproportionately impacted BIPOC Washingtonians, though we don’t yet know the full extent of this disparity because data on race and ethnicity is missing in many cases, including in 29% of cases in the “North” region which includes Whatcom, Skagit, San Juan, and Island Counties.²⁶

²¹ Ibid p. 17

²²

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56a24df4d8af10a5072bed7c/t/5f358b263ca8db1d891a3fc9/1597344678710/Survivors+Know+Best+Report.pdf> p. 10

²³ Ibid p. 38

²⁴ https://www.niwrc.org/sites/default/files/images/resource/stronghearts_2020-year-end-report.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/a-snapshot-of-domestic-violence-during-covid-19/>

²⁶ As of 09/08/21 <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/data-tables/COVID-19MorbidityMortalityRaceEthnicityLanguageWASstate.pdf>

“The isolation that is needed to stop the spread of the virus is contrary to the ways people would naturally respond in a time of crisis”²⁷

–Whatcom County COVID-19 Community Health Impact Assessment

Although not specifically able to address sexual or domestic violence, the *Whatcom County COVID-19 Community Health Impact Assessment*, published July 2021, described how **“The pandemic put significant stress on the systems that we already knew were broken.”²⁸**

This local assessment focused on five community health indicators: kindergarten readiness, child care, housing security, homelessness, and behavioral health—areas that intersect with sexual and domestic violence and impact many survivors.

The report found that a lack of access to childcare “impacted women’s ability—especially non-white women—to participate in the workforce.”²⁹ Because women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence³⁰ this lack of childcare could particularly impact survivors who have children. This inability to work could create circumstances where an abusive partner or ex-partner is able to exert more control, by creating increased economic dependence on the abusive person and increasing the abusive person’s ability to monitor the survivor.

Survivors’ options for safety are limited and abusive people can increase control in the current climate of housing insecurity in our community. The *Community Health Impact Assessment* noted that rental vacancies are low and rent is high—even pre-pandemic, half of Whatcom County renters spent more than 30% of their income on rent.³¹ We know from previous local Point-in-Time Count reports (see p. 20) that domestic violence is one of the leading reasons for homelessness in our community. Experiencing homelessness can increase an abuser’s control, limit survivors’ options, and put people at risk of sexual violence and other forms of violence.

For the final focus area, behavioral health, the *Assessment* indicated that there has been an increased need for behavioral health care during the pandemic, but our community faces “limited services and

²⁷ <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/3760/COVID-19-Community-Health-Impact-Assessm> p. 38

²⁸ *ibid* p. 6

²⁹ *ibid* p. 19

³⁰ <https://www.thehotline.org/stakeholders/domestic-violence-statistics/>

³¹ <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/3760/COVID-19-Community-Health-Impact-Assessm> p. 25 & 27

long wait lists.”³² At the time of publishing, the *Assessment* explained that wait times for services were about five months. As a survey respondent shared for the Commission’s analysis, there is a huge need for BIPOC therapists in our community. This was echoed in the *Assessment* which stated that the greatest unmet need for behavioral health services included people of color.

An Opportunity Council survey of clients at the end of 2020 identified that for the 600 survey participants, employment, finances, challenges for children, and social isolation were the top challenges during the pandemic.³³

Survivors experience the above challenges, too, in addition to coping with the physical, emotional, logistical, financial, social, and other impacts of experiencing sexual and/or domestic violence.

Recommendations, guidance, and orders have changed and are continuing to change. The circumstances around the challenges described by survivors and practitioners may have already changed, and will likely change again, calling systems to continue to practice flexibility and swiftly respond to new information. As one survey participant shared for the Commission’s survey, **the current challenges our community faces are “Not just because of the pandemic. It’s a broken system, but COVID exacerbated it.”**

Theme I:

Isolation, financial challenges, and substance use decreased survivor safety and wellbeing

Isolation

Survivors and practitioners emphasized the impact of isolation during the pandemic. One shared that her abusive spouse working from home complicated that abusive person’s ability to manage his mental health disorders, and that a lack of childcare made being stuck at home with an abusive partner even worse.

³² *ibid* p. 34

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOYanOqjsLA>

“Recovering from an assault is already so isolating. The stay-at-home order only exacerbated that isolation. I stopped talking to everyone in my life, and nobody could come and visit or check on me because of it.” —Local Survivor

Survivors and practitioners observed that spending more time at home, due to job loss, stay-at-home orders, closure of schools and community services, and caution to prevent COVID-19 spread:

- increased survivors’ isolation from support systems
- increased survivors’ risk in trying to get help
- limited their choices
- limited the number of people interacting with children, such as teachers and childcare workers, to observe when children were having a hard time at home
- decreased survivors’ participation and connection with services

Contacts with Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services were down compared to 2019 (see p. 11). This could be because survivors had fewer opportunities to reach out safely when isolated at home.³⁴

“I never would have stayed in this situation as long as I did, but with [the pandemic] I didn’t know what to do.” —Local Survivor

Financial Challenges

Seven of the eight survey participants who completed the online survey identified as essential workers during some point in the pandemic. Seven survey participants also experienced economic impacts from the pandemic, including:

- Having to delay start of a healthcare job due to delay in licensing exam
- Having previously worked in performance industry, so job was eliminated
- Ex-partner stopped paying child support
- Little to no job opportunities during the first year of the pandemic

³⁴ <https://www.bellinghamherald.com/article242446851.html>

“I had to pay all the bills.” —Local Survivor

One survivor shared how she had to pay all household expenses after her abusive partner was arrested for domestic violence and a criminal No Contact Order was put into place by the court. She had to pay rent as well as water, gas, electricity. She also had to pay for damages that the abusive partner had caused to the apartment.

Practitioners identified that some of survivors’ greatest needs during the pandemic have been assistance with bills, food, and basic necessities, and that many survivors were not able to leave an abusive relationship due at least in part to financial limitations. One advocate shared that financial abuse, along with digital coercion and abusive litigation “seems to be rampant,” though they were not sure that this was specifically pandemic-related. A practitioner who works in the criminal legal field had observed that “Initially some survivors wanted to know how the person who harmed them were doing [in jail] given the health concerns, financial and other impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.” Another advocate, interviewed in the Bellingham Herald, pointed out that job loss for a survivor can mean that an abusive person is able to increase their financial control.³⁵

Substance Use

“When [COVID-19] happened, true colors were shown. He wasn’t working. He was drinking. We were stuck together.” —Local Survivor

For some survivors, abuse intensified during the stay-at-home order, exacerbated by their partner’s increased drinking. Practitioners observed that both survivors and people causing harm were drinking and using more during the pandemic. Shared one practitioner, “I have heard several reports from victims about their partners who were sober and plugged in before COVID, but then their services and their new recovery life started slipping through their fingers after lockdown started. These factors have directly contributed to relapse and physical abuse in the home.”

³⁵ <https://www.bellinghamherald.com/article242446851.html>

Theme II: Remote and limited services created challenges for survivors and practitioners

Health & Social Services

Survivors described many challenges to accessing health and social services during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Worry about the safety** of communal living in emergency shelters
- **Lack of internet access**, which prevented use of virtual services
- Challenge of having **no privacy** from children and abusive partners during therapy and medical appointments. One survivor expressed that the lack of privacy during virtual medical appointments for a new baby meant she did not get the mental health screening she needed, as she was not able to be honest in front of her abusive partner. For new mothers, well-child visits for new babies are often a place they are asked about signs of perinatal mood disorders, like post-partum depression

Survivors expressed grief over loss of interpersonal connection without in-person services, and practitioners noted this challenge as well:

- “I signed up for group therapy at DVSAS, but it’s been all digital. It’s helped a little, but **after the zoom call ends, I’m alone again.**”
- “Clients have felt less connected with advocacy and overwhelmingly prefer in-person services.”
- “Youth especially have a difficult time staying focused on Zoom”
- Practitioners shared that it is emotionally difficult to not be able to offer in-person services to those survivors who preferred to meet in-person

Forensic exam services for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence were greatly impacted by the pandemic:

- **“survivors were not seeking help when needed unless it was severe”** said a healthcare practitioner
- DVSAS saw a significant decrease in sexual assault medical advocacy, from 105 contacts in 2019 to only 26 in 2020. Domestic violence medical advocacy also decreased from 45 contacts

in 2019 to 9 in 2020. This was due, at least in part, to hospital policy preventing advocates from responding in-person.

- Telephone advocacy decreased survivor connection with advocates—A healthcare practitioner said that for part of the pandemic “most survivors were not willing to call advocacy when needed.”

Some survivors experienced delays or no response from social services. One reported leaving voicemails *and* emailing a local non-profit, never to hear back. Another shared that they waited weeks to hear back about a support group and then it took even longer for a new group to start. Another survivor shared that by the time they’d heard back, they’d already moved away to be closer to family after the end of their relationship. One practitioner observed that survivors being unable to reach a live person was really hard when trying to seek information and referrals for other services.

Legal System Barriers

“They may understand that our hands are tied, but it doesn't make them feel any better or any safer.” –Local Practitioner

Survivors and practitioners described several barriers to accessing the legal system and achieving a sense of justice. Some of these barriers are directly related to the pandemic and others were unrelated, though intensified by pandemic-related barriers.

One survivor shared that she could not trust calling 911 in response to her partner’s mental health crises because of her fears that police officers are not well-trained in de-escalation, and that their weapons and even their uniform could escalate someone in crisis. She suggested that a program like [CAHOOTS](#) (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets, a program in Eugene, OR) could be an alternative in our community.

One survivor, whose abuser was arrested for domestic violence in 2020, had the court date pushed back repeatedly, both due to the pandemic safety measures and then [Bellingham Municipal Court closures](#), had her court date pushed back again until September 2021. She described how a delay months ago impacted her: “I didn’t find out until the day of that it got pushed back. 1-2 weeks before [the] next court date I started having terrible anxiety. I have a hard time sitting there and not freaking out. **I go through emotions, I get past it, and then it gets pushed back again. Then I have to go through the whole thing again.**”

A March 2021 Bellingham Herald article on the backlog of cases reported that of the eight felony prosecutors in the Whatcom County Prosecutors Office, each had about 250 open cases. Prior to the pandemic, they each had 150 open cases. Attorneys in the Whatcom County Public Defender's Office are also taking on more cases.³⁶ The article did not specifically discuss the impact on victim/witness coordinators, but one can imagine that they are also experiencing higher caseloads.

Delays, suspension, and limits on hearings and trials have created challenges for all involved.

“There has been jockeying for space [in the courtroom] that has even put the victim in direct competition with the defendant's support people, which has led to some uncomfortable and retraumatizing moments” –Local Practitioner

Practitioners Shared:

- “Limiting jail services and releasing offenders due to Covid concerns is a dangerous precedent.”
- **Survivors are frustrated with delays:** They are “experiencing a sense that nothing has been happening with their cases after seeing additional continuances of trial dates.”
- The option to view hearings through Zoom were not available when the defendant was in jail, so remote access was limited for survivors and their support people in those cases
- **Limiting the number of support people** who can attend a criminal trial has been challenging for survivors and for prosecution-based and community-based advocates
- It's been **difficult for advocates to be fully present** for victims while watching hearings and trials via livestream
- **Some survivors no longer want to participate** in the criminal legal process due to delays because they've “moved on”
- **Other survivors expressed relief** that trials were suspended so they could focus on other areas of their lives

³⁶ https://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/coronavirus/article249907358.html?ac_cid=DM411165&ac_bid=-176969860

- Living with trauma and navigating a sometimes unwelcoming court system put **survivors** **“in danger of giving up”**

Survivors Shared:

- **“Terrible anxiety”** as court dates approach, are delayed, and rescheduled once again
- Legal system delays have made it **difficult to “move on”** from the trauma and have offered no closure
- Experiences of having to advocate for oneself as an abusive ex-partner used the legal system as a tactic of abuse. There was not routinely a police officer in the courtroom during a Protection Order hearing even though there was already a criminal No Contact Order in place
- A Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) assigned to a family law case did not contact the survivor for three months at the beginning of the pandemic, leaving the survivor waiting to make progress on their case
- Worry about the impacts of delays on other cases: “Because of closures in general and everything being closed due to COVID, it’s going to create a huge domino effect. Now at this point, all of the other things that were delayed are going to go first. **If my case is being pushed back, imagine all these other cases.”**
- As stated by one survivor and echoed by others, “Courts need to be trauma informed.”

Survivors:

- Felt courts did not care about the stress and impact of the pandemic on single mothers
- Felt new judges “know nothing about family law or domestic violence”
- Felt court staff, including judicial officers, did not know “what PTSD looks like, especially when dealing with abuse cases”
- Observed that “everyone in the system is traumatized by the system,” meaning all judicial officers, court staff, lawyers, advocates, and community members using the court systems

“I’m trying to move on with my life and I can’t move on when I feel like this court is still connected to me.” –Local Survivor

The delays in justice are not unique to Whatcom County. The King County Sexual Assault Resource Center also reported that “with pandemic closures, justice system delays have reached a crisis point,

preventing victims, the majority of whom are young, from moving forward with their healing and their lives.”³⁷

Practitioners Health & Safety Concerns

The physical and mental health of practitioners matters. Because many services could not be performed remotely, many practitioners continued to work in person, causing significant stress. Practitioners who worked in shared workspaces, in courtrooms, shelters, the jail, and other locations, felt concerned about the health and safety of themselves and their colleagues:

- “I could not work from home. I came to work every day **even though I was in fear of getting sick and dying.**”
- **“We should have received more protections** earlier rather than later.”
- Experienced the stress of working with the public and people who were “not consistently following safety protocols”

A New Approach

As described above, there have been access issues regarding remote services, but **for some survivors, remote services increased access**. Practitioners described increased efficiency for survivors who did not have to travel for services, and so needed to take less time off work or to manage childcare needs.

Theme III: Lack of appropriate BIPOC support

As discussed in the introduction, COVID-19 and responses to the pandemic disproportionately impacted BIPOC community members. **Lack of BIPOC providers stood out in surveys and interviews**. One survivor shared that there were no BIPOC therapists in Whatcom or Skagit Counties with availability for new clients. Practitioners observed ongoing challenges for BIPOC survivors as well, with one sharing that a survivor expressed that they did not want to work with that office because they did not have any BIPOC advocates. **Language access also continues to be challenging** with too few practitioners speaking languages other than English to better serve survivors and other community members.

³⁷ <https://www.kcsarc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Long-Wait-KCSARC-Report-to-Community.pdf>

Recommendations

Employers:

- [Adopt Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Workplace Policy and Procedures](#)

Healthcare, Social Services, and Schools:

- [Strengthen training, screening, & response to domestic and sexual violence](#)
- Implement [Safe Futures Resource Guide](#) for use within K-12 schools

Community-based and Tribal-Based Advocacy:

- Build capacity of community to respond to [friends, family, & coworkers](#)
- Increase access to & delivery of virtual support groups to prevent isolation

All Responding Systems:

- Build local capacity to recruit, train, and support BIPOC practitioners in all areas of response, including prosecution-based and community-based advocates, criminal and civil legal systems, behavioral health, healthcare
- Develop alternate means of accessing services, such as ability to file protection orders online, electronic process service, virtual hearings, & access to advocacy via text or chat
- Develop & promote clear communication about what services/responses are available – affirm that support is still available
- Actively address vicarious trauma, stress, & burnout among practitioners
- Build institutional capacity to address gender & racial discrimination/disparities

Governments and Private Funders:

- Fund housing, childcare, & economic relief
- Fund culturally specific community-based services
- Fund civil legal assistance, particularly family law assistance, for survivors

Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence

September 2021

Community Appointments:

Beth Boyd,
PeaceHealth Medical Center

Christina Kobdich,
Unity Care Northwest

Ken Levinson,
Nooksack Tribe

Byron Manering,
Brigid Collins Family Support Center

Moonwater,
Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center

Emily O'Connor
Lydia Place

Katie Olvera,
KPO Counselling

Chris Roselli,
Western Washington University

Garret Shelsta,
Christ the King Church-Bellingham

Krista Touros,
Peace Health

Raquel Vernola,
Whatcom Community College

Government Representatives:

Nicole Berman,
Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services

William Elfo,
Whatcom County Sheriff's Office

Starck Follis,
Whatcom County Public Defender

Greg Hansen,
City of Ferndale

Erika Lautenbach,
Whatcom County Health Department

Darlene Peterson,
Bellingham Municipal Court

Linda Quinn,
Ferndale School District

Dave Reynolds,
Whatcom Co. Superior Court

Eric Richey,
Whatcom County Prosecutor

Katrice Rodriguez,
Nooksack Tribe

Donnell Tanksley,
Blaine Police Department

Bruce Van Glubt,
Whatcom County District Court

Visit www.dvcommission.org for more data about sexual and domestic violence in Whatcom County and nationally; information about projects of the Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence; and resources for addressing sexual and domestic violence.