

# Domestic Violence Fatality Review

2020

Legislative Report

## INTRODUCTION

While the pandemic placed extraordinary demands on many of its members, the Commission kept to its regular meeting schedule in 2020 and met six times. It required us to meet differently, but we are very proud of the fact that we continued to do this work despite the challenges of meeting remotely. The Committee completed one in depth case review. We are very grateful to all the witnesses who agreed to meet with us under these conditions. We are very pleased that we were able to continue our work through these difficult times. For a list of current members of the Commission, please see the attached appendix. The Commission is greatly indebted to Ellie Breitmaier from the Department for Children and Families who retired in September 2020 and Sally Kerschner from the Vermont Department of Health who is retiring in April 2021. We would like to thank them for their service and contributions to the Commission.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE 2020 HOMICIDE DATA

According to the Medical Examiner's Office, there were 15 homicides in Vermont in 2020. Of these, eight involved a firearm. The Commission reviewed all 15 homicides and determined that eight were related to domestic violence. For the definition that the Commission uses to determine if a homicide is domestic violence related, please see the attached appendix.

### Cause of Death

Of the eight domestic violence related homicides, four involved firearms, two involved stabbing and two involved blunt trauma injuries.

### Relationship Between Decedent and Responsible Party

Five involved intimate partner relationships, two were recently separated and three involved current partners. In two of these, the responsible party was not the person directly involved in the relationship. Three involved family members who lived in the same household.

### Background of Decedents

Decedents in the domestic violence related homicides ranged in age from 1 month to 71 years old. Seven decedents were white, one was black. There were seven male decedents and one female.

### Background of Responsible Parties

Responsible parties ranged in age from 29 to 58. Seven responsible parties were white, one was black. Five were male and three were female.

### Counties/Location

All but one of the domestic violence related deaths occurred in or around the decedent's home.

Chittenden	1
Franklin	1
Orange	1
Orleans	1
Washington	2
Windham	1
Windsor	1

### Children Present

There were children present in four of the eight domestic violence related homicides.

### Substances/Alcohol

There was alcohol or other substances involved in four of the eight domestic violence related homicides.

### Relief From Abuse Orders

In one domestic violence related homicide, there was a relief from abuse order in effect.

### Murder/Suicides

Of the eight domestic violence homicides, two of them were murder/suicides.

### Suicides Related to Domestic Violence

The Commission is aware of three suicides, unrelated to a homicide, that were related to domestic violence. All three of the decedents were male and were recently separated from their intimate partners. All three involved a firearm. Two had criminal charges involving domestic violence and their ex-partners had obtained a relief from abuse order.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE 2019 DATA

There were 19 homicides in Vermont in 2019. Of those, ten involved a firearm. One more involved a firearm that was not fired. Of the total number of homicides, the Commission determined that eight were domestic violence related.

### Cause of Death

Of the eight domestic violence related homicides, four involved firearms, two involved strangulation, one involved neglect of care and one involved a vehicle.

### Relationship Between Decedent and Responsible Party

Of the eight domestic violence related homicides, six involved intimate partner relationships. Four of the six were current partners and the other two were separated. In one, the responsible party was not directly involved in the relationship and one was an officer involved shooting in response to service call. Two domestic violence related homicides involved family members.

### Background of Decedents

Decedents ranged in age from 28 to 85 years old. Five decedents were female and three were male. All were white.

### Background of Responsible Parties

Responsible parties ranged in age from 28 to 71. Six were male and one was female. Seven were white and one was black. In one case, there were two responsible parties. The demographics of the officer involved shooting in response to a service call is not included.

### Counties/Location

<u>Addison</u>		<u>2</u>
<u>Chittenden</u>		<u>2</u>
<u>Rutland</u>		<u>4</u>

Six of the deaths occurred in or around the home of one of the parties. Two occurred outdoors in a location not near the home.

### Children Present

In one of the domestic violence related homicides, there were young children present. One of the parties involved in one of the incidents was pregnant.

### Substance/Alcohol

There were substances involved in three of the domestic violence related homicides.

### Relief From Abuse Orders

None of the decedents had obtained relief from abuse orders.

### Murder/Suicide

Of the eight domestic violence related homicides, two were murder/suicides.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE 2018 DATA

In 2018, there were 16 homicides in Vermont. Twelve involved firearms. Five of the 16 homicides were domestic violence related.

### Cause of Death

Four of the five were committed with firearms. One death was caused by asphyxiation.

### Relationship between Decedent and Responsible Party

Four involved intimate partners and one involved a family member. Of the four intimate partners, one was a current partner and the other three involved recently separated partners.

### Background of Decedents

Decedents ranged in age from 11 mos to 54 years old. One was male and four were females. One was black and four were white.

### Background of Responsible Party

Responsible parties ranged in age from 23 to 70 years old. All were male. Three were white and two were black.

### Counties/Location

Chittenden	1
Orleans	1

Washington	1
Windsor	2

All decedents died inside their homes.

#### Substances/Alcohol

At least two of the five domestic violence related homicides involved drugs and/or alcohol

#### Children Present

One homicide involved a child. There were children present in one other domestic violence related homicide.

#### Relief from Abuse Orders

Two of the decedents had obtained relief from abuse orders in the past. None were in effect at the time of the homicide.

#### Murder/Suicide

There was one murder/suicide and one murder/attempted suicide.

### Historical Data 1994-2020

The Commission has been tracking adult, domestic violence related homicides since 1994. Prior to 2014, the Commission did not track child decedents. Thus the following data omits any child decedents from the totals and therefore the totals are undercounted.

Since 1994, there have been 346 adult homicides. Of those, 167 or 48% were domestic violence related. Of the 167 deaths, 94 were caused by firearms, or 56%.

## National Data

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. crime report data suggest that nationally 1 in 5 homicide victims are killed by an intimate partner and that over half of female homicide victims are killed by a current or former partner.

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/fastfact.html>. The CDC reports that most intimate partner related homicides are committed with a firearm.

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/ss/ss6908a1.htm>.

## Resources

There are many resources available for people experiencing domestic violence. The National Domestic Violence Hotline: you can use their safety planning tip sheet

<https://www.thehotline.org/resources/safety-planning-around-guns-and-firearms> or call (800)

799-SAFE. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse has a statewide hotline for domestic abuse that can be reached at 800-228-7395. The Network's fifteen member programs provide services to survivors in all fourteen counties in Vermont. For an interactive map to help you locate a local program near you, visit <https://vtnetwork.org/get-help/>

## APPENDIX A - DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FATALITY REVIEW COMMISSION MEMBERS

Pursuant to 15 VSA § 1140(b), the Commission is comprised of 17 members, consisting of the following:

- The Attorney General, or his or her designee;

Carolyn Hanson  
Assistant Attorney General  
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- The Commissioner of the Department of Health, or his or her designee;

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- The Commissioner of Department for Children and Families, or his or her designee;

Julie Ryley  
Director of the Domestic and Sexual Violence Unit  
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- The Commissioner of the Department of Corrections, or his or her designee;

Gary Marvel  
Field Operations Manager  
VT Department of Corrections  
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- The Commissioner of the Department of Public Safety, or his or her designee;

Major Daniel Trudeau  
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- The Chief Medical Examiner, or his or her designee;

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- A State's Attorney with experience prosecuting domestic violence cases, appointed by the Executive Director of the Vermont State's Attorneys' Association;

Tracy Shriver, Esq.  
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- The Defender General, or his or her designee;

Kerrie Johnson  
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- A member of the Vermont Coalition of Domestic Violence Accountability Programs;

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Batterer Invention Program  
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- A member of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence;

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- A representative of the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence;

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- A representative of local law enforcement, appointed by the Governor;

Shawn Burke, Chief  
S. Burlington Police Department  
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- A victim or survivor of domestic violence, appointed by the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence;

Susan Hardin

- A physician, appointed by the Governor;

Dr. Tania Bertsch (retired)  
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- The Executive Director of the Vermont Criminal Justice Training Council, or his or her designee;

Jennifer Firpo  
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- The Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health, or his or her designee;

Emily Hawes  
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- One Judge, appointed by the Chief Justice of the Vermont Supreme Court.

The Honorable Kirstin Schoonover  
Superior Court Judge  
Family and Criminal Division  
[Kirstin.Schoonover@vermont.gov](mailto:Kirstin.Schoonover@vermont.gov)

## APPENDIX B - COMMISSION DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RELATED FATALITY

When determining whether a fatality is domestic violence related for data collection and/or full case review, the Executive Committee and the full Commission may consider the following criteria.

Whether:

- a. the alleged perpetrator was related to the victim as a "family member" according to the "plain and commonly accepted meaning" of the term. Donley v. Donley 165 Vt. 619 (1996)
- c. the alleged perpetrator and victim were related as "household members" under the Abuse Prevention Act at 15 V.S.A. Sec 1101(2)<sup>1</sup>
- d. the alleged perpetrator killed an estranged partner's current "household member"
- e. the alleged perpetrator killed a current partner's estranged "household member"
- f. the alleged perpetrator killed a family member's current or estranged "household member"
- g. the alleged perpetrator killed bystander(s) while attempting to harm family or "household members"
- h. the alleged perpetrator is a law enforcement officer forced to kill in the line of duty when responding to a domestic violence incident;
- i. a law enforcement officer is killed in the line of duty when responding to a domestic violence incident;
- j. the fatality is domestic violence related but is ruled a justifiable homicide;
- k. the fatality is a murder-suicide matter involving family or household members;<sup>2</sup>
- l. the fatality is a suicide where there is documented history of domestic violence to include victim suicide; alleged perpetrator suicide (as violent act in front of family or household members); alleged perpetrator suicide by law enforcement and teen suicide.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Household members" means persons who, for any period of time, are living or have lived together, are sharing or have shared occupancy of a dwelling, are engaged in or have engaged in a sexual relationship, or minors or adults who are dating or who have dated. "Dating" means a social relationship of a romantic nature. Factors that the court may consider when determining whether a dating relationship exists or existed include: (a) the nature of the relationship; (b) the length of time the relationship existed; (c) the frequency of interaction between the parties; (d) the length of time since the relationship was terminated, if applicable. 15 V.S.A. § 1101 (2)

<sup>2</sup> Those who died by suicide are not included in the Vermont homicide numbers or in the domestic violence related homicide numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Those who died by suicide are not counted in Vermont homicide total, or in the domestic violence related homicide total, but they are counted by the Vermont Department of Health. More information can be found here: <https://vtspc.org/vermont-statistics-on-suicide/> and [https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR\\_Injury\\_Weekly\\_Suicide\\_Report.pdf](https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR_Injury_Weekly_Suicide_Report.pdf)

There is no formal reporting process for domestic violence related suicides. The Commission only reports those that are reported to them. These numbers are grossly underreported.