

AT A GLANCE

Location of Court

Dallas, Texas

Type of Court

Specialized Criminal
Domestic Violence Court

Project Goals

- Become more proactive and less reactive in the way the court system responds to domestic violence cases
- Increase victim safety and offender accountability

DALLAS COUNTY SPECIALIZED CRIMINAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COURT

The Dallas County Specialized Criminal Domestic Violence (DV) Court handles misdemeanor domestic violence cases from the time they are filed by the district attorney's office until they are finally disposed.



CENTER

FOR

COURT

INNOVATION

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This fact sheet is part of a series describing Domestic Violence Mentor Courts. Selected by the Office on Violence Against Women, Mentor Courts share their expertise and assist other domestic violence courts in implementing promising practices and procedures, and building the capacity of state court systems to respond effectively to these difficult cases.

COURT STAFF

- 1 dedicated **judge** oversees the court and hears cases all week
- **Court coordinator:** schedules cases and assists the judge with monitoring defendants who are on bond
- **Probation officers:** supervise all offenders on probation
- **Pre-trial compliance officer:** monitors defendants who are on bond
- 3 **prosecutors**, 1 **public defender**, 2 **clerks**, and 1 **bailiff**

CASE MANAGEMENT

Types of cases: The DV Court hears misdemeanor domestic violence cases.

Case identification, screening, and transfer: Law enforcement and the district attorney's office coordinate to properly label all domestic violence cases at the time of filing. Dallas County court rules mandate that domestic violence cases are filed in the court from the beginning.

The court coordinator acts as the judge's right hand in all things related to the day-to-day management of the court. In particular, the coordinator will gather information filed with the court relevant to victim safety and present them to the judge for review. Typically, the information gathered includes criminal histories of offenders and probable cause affidavits filed by law enforcement.

The coordinator works closely with the pre-trial compliance officer to monitor the compliance of offenders with the court's conditions of bond. The court coordinator attends the judge's weekly meetings to discuss cases to offer information related to court management, safety, compliance and to assist the judge in problem-solving situations as they arise.

Information sharing: Court personnel undertake specific actions to request and receive necessary information and parties inform the bench about the existence of cases in other courts.

Schedule: Cases are heard Monday through Friday from 9 am – 4:30 pm.

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Frequency of stakeholder meetings: Weekly meetings between the judge, the district attorney's office and probation. Quarterly meetings between the judge and batterer intervention program providers. Bimonthly meetings between the judge, victim services, and law enforcement.

List of stakeholders: Court staff, the district attorney's office, probation, batterer's intervention programs, local shelters, law enforcement, city and county political leaders, and victim advocates.

VICTIM SAFETY

Court security: The court employs traditional strategies such as metal detectors at the courthouse entrance and an assigned sheriff's deputy in the courtroom for all proceedings. Staff also employs intense offender monitoring, safety planning, and electronic monitoring.

Secure waiting areas: The District Attorney's Office operates a secured waiting room on a separate floor from the court where victims and their children can wait.

Risk assessment: The judge and court staff rely on numerous years of experience to identify risk factors and the risk level in each case. These risk factors correspond to the factors found on published risk assessment tools. In addition, the court uses lethality assessments to issue conditions of bond or probation for offenders.

Victim services: Victim advocates from the district attorney's office and probation help connect victims to multiple community partners that provide direct services. The victim advocate helps the court create a feeling and atmosphere of openness for the victim. Even if the victim ultimately wants to drop the charges, she will know that she can change her mind and still come back tomorrow.

OFFENDER ACCOUNTABILITY

Compliance reviews: The court schedules compliance reviews as needed, specifically for high-risk offenders. Compliance reviews directly involving the judge are not regularly scheduled for every offender due to the sheer number of offenders. A compliance review involving the judge will be scheduled for offenders who are not in compliance with the court's orders. The judge relies on court staff to conduct regular reviews of the progress and compliance of offenders.

When compliance reviews are ordered by the court the judge will typically review several offenders during the same hearing. The judge will confront the offender about the noncompliance issues and give the offender an opportunity to be heard during the review hearing or to request a formal hearing on the evidence. The judge will access sanctions proportional to the noncompliance issue. For offenders with recurring noncompliance issues, the judge will access increasingly severe sanctions and if necessary incarcerate the offender.

Offender services: The court may order offenders to a batterer's intervention and prevention program, which maintains a strong relationship with the court. The program directly addresses an offender's use of violence in intimate partner relationships.

For offenders on probation who have difficulty finding or maintaining employment, the probation department will assist offenders with their job searches whether it is with positive encouragement or with direct recommendations on where to apply for work. For offenders on probation who have a substance-abuse problem, the probation department will assist offenders in finding outpatient or inpatient counseling, sometimes at no cost to the offender. The batterer's intervention and prevention programs provide the court with regular reporting, especially when offenders are not attending or being disruptive in class.

LEGAL SERVICES

Victims are represented for free by the District Attorney's Office while defendants pay for legal services unless they are appointed counsel because they are indigent.

The District Attorney's Office provides representation for victims in all criminal cases. Victims are typically contacted by a victim advocate and a prosecutor assigned to their case. The advocate and prosecutor work together to assess the victim's safety and to maintain contact with the victim as the case proceeds. The prosecutor will initiate the appropriate court proceedings if the prosecutor believes the victim is at a high risk for further violence. The District Attorney's Office will also request an order of protection for the victim free of charge and approve applications for U-visas in the appropriate circumstances.

TRAINING

Court staff has participated in training that includes:

- *Crimes Against Women Conference*
- *Fathers and Domestic Violence Conference*

Court staff has provided training that includes:

- *Enhancing Judicial Skills on Domestic Violence*
- *Alternative Dispute Resolution Roundtable*
- *Judicial Demeanor Roundtable*
- *Judicial Summit on Domestic Violence*

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