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Domestic tragedies force new steps

Grant funds manpower to back protective orders

By Lawrence Buser
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Just hours after Christie Thurmond Harris was shot to death last year by her estranged husband, a letter she had written arrived in the state prosecutor's office.

"If something happens to me, I want you to know who is doing all of this harm to me," her desperate letter said. "Ultimately I do not feel this Order has protected me at all."

Thurmond Harris' situation is widely viewed as a worst-case scenario and as a motivational guide for those in the legal system trying to improve the plight of victims of domestic violence.

Among them are those involved in a \$900,000 two-year federal grant program designed to bring stricter enforcement of protective orders by aggressively going after offenders.

"If they're having problems with enforcement of an order of protection, now there's a better way to enter the system so we don't have more Christie Thurmonds or Jennifer Braddocks," said managing attorney Sonja White of the Domestic Violence Project at Memphis Area Legal Services. "We're going to find out what's going on. You stalk her, we stalk you."

Jennifer Braddock, a Memphis woman who was killed in a domestic dispute in 2003, was memorialized last year with legislation bearing her name that made violation of a protective order a criminal misdemeanor -- with punishment of up to 11 months and 29 days in jail -- rather than a civil contempt charge with a maximum punishment of 10 days in jail.

Orders of protection are issued by judges to keep spouses, ex-spouses and partners away from people they have threatened or abused. The orders are designed to stop further violence, although that often does not happen.

Local law enforcement receives some 600 reports of domestic violence each month, and more than 300 requests for protective orders are reviewed each month by the Shelby County Domestic Violence Court.

Last year 23 killings involved people who were related or who lived together.

The grant program provides for a team of two police officers, two sheriff's deputies, a prosecutor, a pretrial services counselor and a nongovernmental advocate.

The goal is to better identify brewing trouble and to discourage or prosecute the troublemaker before a series of seemingly small incidents leads to a serious act of violence.

"If a victim doesn't have a lawyer, the chances of getting an order of protection are slimmer because they have to make their own case, present their own evidence ..." said White. "Here we help them make the case for enforcement of the order. Every aspect of that person's encounter (with the justice system) will be covered."

Webb Brewer, director of litigation at MALS, said the addition of two full-time police officers working solely on such cases should have an impact on how orders are enforced as well as how they are seen by offenders.

"The extra officers can focus on enforcing orders by doing things like staking out a house and seeing if he did show up," he said.

"They can go out and really do something about it and not just tell somebody to stay away or don't come back. It really will enhance enforcement."

A grant renewal is in the works and there is hope more officers can be added.

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HOW TO GET HELP

Victims of domestic violence can call YWCA court advocate Laura James at 545-3737 for information on how to get help.

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