**Safety Planning with Domestic Violence Survivors Template**



Safety planning refers to an active process of identifying and mitigating risks to safety. It is not just a checklist or a form. As an attorney, you have an important opportunity to safety plan with domestic violence survivors to help them avoid additional harm.

“As an attorney I feel that I have a unique role in safety planning with my clients. It is important to be aware of how legal actions can affect survivor safety. But more than that, I hope to draft legal orders with safety of the survivor and children in mind so that, long after my involvement in the case has ended, the survivor has a built-in safety mechanism.”

- A family law attorney

This handout will cover how to:

* Recognize and mitigate safety risks;
* Develop safer court orders including parenting plans; and
* Connect to domestic violence advocates for in-depth safety planning and consultation

**You are ideally situated to help survivors improve their safety for many reasons including:**

* You may be the first professional survivors contact when they are contemplating a change that may put them at risk (see [Separation Violence](#SeparationViolence)).
* Some survivors may not be aware that taking legal action can put them at greater risk in the short-term even if it benefits them in the long-term.
* The legal documents you draft and the steps you take when representing or advising survivors can directly affect their safety.
* You can connect survivors to a domestic violence advocacy program to further improve their safety.

By integrating basic safety planning considerations into your legal practice, you can really make a difference in the safety of survivors and their children.

**General Safety Planning Tips**

* Keep in mind that survivors are good judges of the risks they face. Ask them about their biggest safety concerns.
* Survivors are experts on what will work to improve their safety and what will trigger their partners. Ask them what has worked to keep them safe so far.
* Be clear about what you can and cannot do regarding their safety.
* Suggest that survivors call 911, if they are facing an immediate threat. Be aware that some survivors do not consider law enforcement assistance to be a viable option for them, particularly if the survivor is part of a marginalized community.

**Coercive Control**

Domestic violence is about coercive control. Coercive control is about exploitation, deprivation, and regulation. All of the safety risks identified below are forms of coercive control. As you safety plan with survivors, keep in mind that highly controlling abusers are more likely to kill their partners.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While not all survivors face the risk of homicide, coercive control can take a serious toll on survivors’ emotional and physical wellbeing and that of their children. People who are abusive look for opportunities to maintain or regain their coercive control. For example, they are likely to exploit any ambiguities or omissions in a court order.The more that you can define the parameters of any court order, the more successful you will be in mitigating the abusive partner’s attempts to coercively control the survivor.

Define clearly and specifically:

* All provisions in a court order (visitation, child exchanges, decision-making, child support enforcement, etc.)
  + Consequences of non-compliance including documentation and enforcement (e.g., if a limited party commits future acts of domestic violence, then their residential time is suspended or reduced); and
  + What is supposed to happen if unexpected obstacles occur? For example, what happens if a party cannot meet at the exchange location or is late?

**Common Safety Risks that Attorneys Can Address**

Below are some common risks to survivors’ emotional and physical wellbeing, and steps you can take to mitigate those risks. Some of the categories have information that could also apply to other categories, so we recommend reading all of the sections.

**Separation ViolencE**

**Safety Risk**

Post-separation violence is common. Between 1997 and 2010, at least 46% of domestic violence homicides in Washington State occurred *after* the domestic violence victim had attempted to or actually left, divorced, or separated from their abusive partner.[[2]](#footnote-2) Even the perception that the survivor is going to leave can be dangerous. If a survivor plans to leave or initiate legal action (e.g., filing for a Domestic Violence Protection Order or filing a family law case), their abusive partner may feel like they are losing control. Since domestic violence is about having coercive control over one’s partner, the person who is abusive is likely to take action to regain that sense of control. This can be highly dangerous for the survivor. This does not mean that the survivor needs to stay in the relationship or avoid taking legal action; it does mean it is crucial to safety plan regarding this.

**What You Can Do**

In a reasonably healthy relationship, one person would tell the other before leaving, taking steps to dissolve a marriage, or seeking custody. Survivors may understandably feel that they should inform their partners that they are considering these steps. It is important that you discuss this with your clients and make sure they understand the risk of alerting their partners to their plans. Survivors deserve to prioritize their own safety.

**Stalking / Monitoring**

**Safety Risk**

Many people who are abusive engage in stalking to monitor their partners, to gather information to use against them, and to frighten and control them. It is not unusual for abusers to utilize technology to monitor a survivor’s whereabouts and to see or hear their electronic communications. Stalking can seriously harm survivors’ emotional wellbeing. The prevalence of anxiety, insomnia, and severe depression is much higher among stalking victims than the general population.[[3]](#footnote-3) Stalking is associated with sexual and physical violence and coercive control. Studies suggest that stalking intensity and frequency increases during separation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**What You Can Do**

Ask the survivor how the two of you can communicate safely. Does their abusive partner electronically monitor their communications or seem to always know where they have been or who they called?

If the abusive partner does not already know where the survivor lives or works, or if the survivor will be moving, it is important to take steps to keep the survivor’s locations confidential. These include:

* Talk to the survivor about keeping their address confidential. This might include participating in an address confidentiality program,[[5]](#footnote-5) a substitute mailing address program for survivors. If survivors sign up for this type of program, they should do so *before* they move. If you have an address confidentiality program in your state, you can insert a link or include more specific instructions regarding participating. If you do not have an ACP in your state, you may still want to keep the list of programs in the footnote, so attorneys know that this may be an option if the survivor moves to another state or in case the attorney wants to advocate for an ACP locally.
* Do not put the survivor’s actual address on court forms including:
  + The Confidential Information Form Edit form names if they are different in your jurisdiction.
  + The Law Enforcement Information Sheet
  + Child Support Order (be sure the address used is one where the survivor can reliably get the support checks)
* Redact the survivor’s address and any other confidential information from documents you are submitting (e.g. redact the survivor’s place of employment from paystubs)

**Financial Control**

**Safety Risk**

It is common for people who are abusive to use money and possessions to control their partners. How money is spent or withheld and who controls it may be significant triggers for abuse in the relationship. It is common for people who are abusive to take or destroy possessions in order to coercively control their partners.

**What You Can Do**

Ninety percent of women with current or former abusive partners want to pursue child support if they can do so safely.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ask survivors how they think their abusive partners will react to being ordered to pay child support. Do they think that it will escalate the domestic violence or put them or their children at greater risk? Do they have concerns about being able to collect child support without facing harm? If a survivor has these concerns, discuss these options: Edit the name of the child support agency if it is not called DCS in your state. Edit the content below to reflect what is accurate in your state.

* Asking the Department of Child Support (DCS) to collect the support on the survivor’s behalf (e.g., by garnishing wages) either administratively or through a child support court order; or
* Asking DCS to refrain from seeking child support due to “good cause.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Talk to survivors about asset and property division. What barriers do they anticipate might arise in this process?

* Articulate clearly and specifically the process for any orders that grant the survivor possession of assets or property.
* Ensure that these orders include concrete deadlines and clearly spell out the consequences for failure to meet the order’s requirements. For example, the failing party would not receive their allocated property until they completed the transfer required by the order. Clearly defining the deadlines can assist in future enforcement actions, or allow the court to hold the non-cooperative party in contempt. The court has broad authority to enforce its divisions of property, but it requires clear violations before it can do so.

**Abusive Use of Litigation**

**Safety Risk**

Abusive use of litigation is the misuse of the legal system to coercively control, harass, exhaust, intimidate and/or impoverish survivors. The courtroom may be the only place abusive people get to see their former partners. Litigation can create an opportunity for abusive people to continue to harm their partners. The emotional and financial toll of repeated litigation can have a devastating impact on survivors and their children.

**What You Can Do**

Strategies to address or prevent abusive use of litigation include:

* Asking the court to order the other party to pay attorney fees and expenses;
* Seeking sanctions under insert court rule that allows this, if applicable;
* Asking the court to use their inherent authority to restrain abusive litigation and control proceedings;
* Being prepared to identify the pattern of abusive litigation for the judicial officer since the abuse may have taken place before multiple judicial officers;
* Asking for a court order requiring court approval prior to the abusive partner being allowed to file more motions; and
* Asking the court to allow the survivor to appear by phone, so the abusive partner does not get to see the survivor.

**Using Mental Health Concerns to Coerce**

**Safety Risk**

It is common for people who are abusive to accuse their partners of being crazy, and to do things deliberately to make survivors feel like they are losing their minds[[8]](#footnote-8) (also known as *gaslighting*[[9]](#footnote-9)). In addition, survivors of abuse often experience emotional and/or behavioral responses to trauma. While many survivors do reach out for emotional support and mental health care, their abusive partners may undermine their efforts to feel better. Nearly half of survivors who reported to the National Domestic Violence Hotline that they had reached out for mental health support, shared that their abusive partners or ex-partners had tried to prevent or discourage them from getting that help or taking medication they were prescribed for their mental health concerns.[[10]](#footnote-10) Some people who are abusive overmedicate or withhold psychiatric medications to control their partners and to induce symptoms.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Unfortunately, people who are abusive do not just induce emotional problems and undermine survivors’ attempts to heal from them; many also threaten to tell authorities that their partners are crazy. They do this in order to stop survivors from getting something they want or need such as child custody, medication, or a protection order.[[12]](#footnote-12) Causing emotional harm, interfering with healing, and undermining survivors’ credibility are all common coercive control tactics.

This can have particular consequences for survivors and their children during family law proceedings. If a survivor has their parenting time limited as a result of allegations that they have a long-term mental illness that interferes with their parenting, then that can put the survivor and their children at risk. Edit this paragraph if having a long-term mental illness that interferes with performing parenting functions is not a part of your state's statutes.

**What You Can Do**

There are legal arguments and strategies that may be used when an abusive partner tries to make an issue of a survivor’s mental health in a protection order or family law action. For more information, see the Collaboration Project’s publication, *Keeping the Focus on Domestic Violence: A Relative Risks Guide for Attorneys Representing Survivors,* as well as [*Representing Domestic Violence Survivors Who Are Experiencing Trauma and Other Mental Health Challenges: A Handbook for Attorneys*](http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/AttorneyHandbookMay282012.pdf).

People who are abusive or their attorneys may seek to have the court order the survivor to undergo a mental health evaluation. This can deflect attention away from the domestic violence and toward the survivor’s mental health. See the [Family Law Evaluations](http://endgv.org/toolkits/family-law-toolkit-for-domestic-violence-survivors/) handout for strategies to address this. If the survivor wants to see a mental health service provider for emotional support through this process, insert link to mental health service info in your community.

**Substance Abuse**

**Safety Risk**

Drug use by abusers is associated with higher risk of homicidality. In addition, people who are abusive often coerce their partners to use drugs or alcohol, and often use allegations about their partners’ substance use or abuse against them in family court proceedings. 27% of survivors surveyed reported that their partners or ex-partners had pressured or forced them to use alcohol or drugs, or made them use more than they wanted. 37.5% reported that their partners or ex-partners had threatened to report their alcohol or drug use to an authority to keep them from getting something they wanted or needed (e.g., child custody, a job, benefits, or a protective order).[[13]](#footnote-13)

**What You Can Do**

Ask survivors if they have concerns about their abusive partners’ alcohol or drug use. For example, are they worried about the abusive partner using substances during visitations? If so, include drug testing and/or substance abuse treatment as a condition in the parenting plan.

Ask survivors if they have concerns about their own substance use and help them connect to treatment resources, if needed.

**Firearms**

**Safety Risk**

Abusers who possess guns tend to inflict the most severe abuse.[[14]](#footnote-14) Survivors report experiencing a great deal of fear when their partners have access to firearms. Many survivors describe their partners using firearms to intimidate them (e.g., cleaning a gun during an argument).

**What You Can Do**

Ask for an Order of Surrender when requesting a DVPO or a restraining order. The court process for dealing with this is evolving, so consult with a DVPO Advocate, if you have questions about this. Edit this section to reflect what is possible in your state regarding firearms forfeiture and batterers.

**Using / Abusing the Children**

**Safety Risk**

People who are abusive frequently cause major harm to their children. Children exposed to domestic violence may develop a wide range of problems, including interpersonal skill deficits, psychological and emotional problems such as depression and PTSD, and externalizing behavior problems.[[15]](#footnote-15) Abusive ex-partners are likely to undermine the survivor’s parenting role.[[16]](#footnote-16) They are also likely to use children to monitor the survivor.

See the [Using Children Post Separation Wheel](http://www.theduluthmodel.org/training/wheels.html) for additional examples of how abusive people use and abuse children post-separation.

**What You Can Do**

If the abusive parent has undermined the survivor’s parenting or if the survivor needs parenting support for other reasons, insert a link to resources for parenting support in your community. You may also want to include info on what evaluators and judicial officers will be looking for regarding parenting, and how they can strengthen their parenting, if needed. You could address these issues by adapting our Parenting Resources Template into your own tool and then linking to that.

You can also make a difference by drafting parenting plans with safety in mind. A parenting plan can contribute to the safety of survivors and their children if it utilizes mandatory or discretionary limitations and addresses safety considerations in depth.

Survivors may be hesitant to allege domestic violence in a parenting plan or they may be pressured by their abusive partner or the partner’s counsel to not mention the domestic violence in return for receiving more time with their children or another concession. Be clear with survivors about why negotiating away a domestic violence finding can have serious consequences and should be a last resort. The coercive control and abuse they are experiencing will likely continue after the final orders are in place. It can be very difficult to go back to court and seek protections for the domestic violence (e.g., a Domestic Violence Protection Order, modification, or relocation), if there has not already been a finding that domestic violence occurred.

Insert specific guidance about strategies attorneys can use to provide protections in parenting plans.

The court has robust authority to order very specific and nuanced limitations, and you should draft them with this in mind. For example, you may create a “tiered visitation schedule” in which the limited party must adhere to certain conditions before they can have residential time with their children.

Common conditions include proof of enrollment, completion, and ongoing compliance with a:

* + - * State-certified domestic violence batterers intervention program,
      * Parenting program, and
      * Substance abuse treatment program.

If visits are allowed, require that they be supervised by a professional or another third party. Be sure to indicate that the limited party is responsible for paying any associated costs for this.

If you do not have a domestic violence finding you can still mention that domestic violence is a concern in the parenting plan.

**Threats to Abduct Children**

**Safety Risk**

Many survivors are legitimately concerned that their abusive partners will abduct their children, even if the abusive partner has shown no interest in parenting them. People who are abusive threaten to take their children, or actually take them, as a means of asserting their control and as a way to hurt or punish the survivor.

**What You Can Do**

The parenting plan should state any restrictions on the abusive partner from removing the children from a geographic area (e.g. the city, state, or country). If there is a concern that the abusive partner might abduct the children to another country, the parenting plan should provide that the survivor has control of the children’s passports, or that the survivor is the only parent with the right to order passports for the children.

For information about domestic violence and international child abduction, see [WomensLaw.Org's Parenting Kidnapping Information](http://www.womenslaw.org/laws_state_type.php?statelaw_name=Parental%20Kidnapping&state_code=GE) and the [U.S. Department of State’s International Parental Child Abduction](https://travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en.html) website.

**Post-Separation Abuse**

**Safety Risk**

There is a common misconception that domestic violence ends when the parties separate, when in reality it often continues and sometimes escalates.

**What You Can Do**

Draft orders that minimize opportunities for post-separation contact.

* Establish a residential schedule that avoids the client and the other party being in the same place at the same time. For example, have one party drop the children off at daycare or school and the other party pick them up.
* If complete avoidance is not possible, then require that a third party handle child exchanges.
* If that is not possible, then specify that exchanges must take place at particular public, well-trafficked locations or at a police station.
* Consider adding language that explicitly allows your client to make unilateral decisions about the children without consulting the limited party, such as ordering passports for the children and traveling with the children internationally.
* Define how communication is going to occur regarding child exchange or other matters. If there is a protection order in place, make sure that any contact allowed is consistent with the provisions of the order. You can seek to limit communication to only emails, texts, or a web-based program. Ask the survivor what would be the least stressful way to handle communication.
* Consider consolidating your client’s Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO) into the family law case and asking the court to order the DVPO to last longer than a year. This can keep the survivor from having to seek a renewal of the DVPO within a year, which can be stressful and may trigger a dangerous reaction from their abusive partner. Edit this to reflect what is accurate in your state. Add in the statute in a footnote if applicable.
* Make sure to advise the survivor that the DVPO needs to be renewed before it expires and provide guidance on how to do that.
* If you are not able to get a DVPO or if the client does not want a DVPO, you can then request restraining orders (ROs). Judges may resolve many specific safety concerns by issuing a restraining order. While a RO does not offer as much protection as a DVPO, the court can issue a long-term RO, which is a benefit.
* Consider a restraining order that lasts for the duration of the parenting plan.
* Argue against mutual restraining orders. Educate the court that mutual restraining orders can increase the risk to domestic violence survivors. When there is domestic violence in a relationship, a mutual restraining order can be dangerous for many reasons including:
  + They give the abusive partner an opportunity to call the police against the survivor;
  + They are difficult for law enforcement to enforce; and
  + They send the message that both parties are equally responsible for the issues in the relationship.

**Other Safety Risks to Consider**

While you may not have a specific role in ameliorating all of these risks, it is important to be aware of them so you can discuss their significance with survivors, if needed.

* **Abuse of Pets / Service Animals** – Batterers who abuse pets are more dangerous and use more controlling behaviors than those that do not harm animals.[[17]](#footnote-17) Pets and service animals can be included in DVPO’s. Edit this, if needed, to reflect what is true in your state.
* **Pregnancy** - The risk of violence increases when the survivor is pregnant.
* **Sexual Violence** – Many survivors of domestic violence report being sexually assaulted by their partners. Abusers who use sexual violence against their partners are more likely to violate protection orders.[[18]](#footnote-18)
* **Strangulation – Strangulation is one of the most lethal forms of domestic violence: unconsciousness may occur within seconds and death within minutes.**Sometimes symptoms can develop over time, so it is crucial that survivors receive medical care following assaults involving strangulation.[[19]](#footnote-19)
* **Suicidality** - Loss of control can trigger an abuser to commit suicide. About 1/3 of DV homicides in WA involve homicide-suicides.[[20]](#footnote-20) Replace this with a statistic from your own state if one is available.
* **Threats** - Threats can be good indicators of what may actually happen.[[21]](#footnote-21)
* **Unemployment** - Abusers without stable employment are more likely to harm their partners.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Connecting Survivors to Domestic Violence Advocates**

Domestic violence advocates can assist survivors with ongoing and in-depth safety planning, as well as provide many other services they may need. You can make an important difference by encouraging survivors to seek out domestic violence advocacy services.

A recent study found that women who worked with advocates experienced less violence over time, reported higher quality of life and social support, and had less difficulty obtaining community resources over time.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Insert information about local domestic violence advocacy services. Let survivors know that domestic violence advocacy is free! Talk to survivors about how to connect to an advocate. Is it possible for them to call from your office? Would it help if you initiated the call and then put them on the phone? Do they have a safe way to call later? Do they want to call anonymously?

**Consulting and Collaborating with Domestic Violence Advocates**

If you need any assistance addressing safety with a survivor, you can consult with a domestic violence advocate by calling insert a local DV program resource. If your client has a domestic violence advocate, it can be beneficial for you and the advocate to collaborate. Of course, your client needs to be comfortable with this and give permission in writing. Most domestic violence programs will require that the survivor sign the domestic violence program’s release of information form, not just your form.

Benefits of collaboration include:

* Better identification of safety risks and more comprehensive safety planning
* More holistic services for the survivor
* Clearer roles regarding which person is providing which types of support/services (e.g., assisting with gathering documents, reviewing paperwork, accompanying the survivor to court, connecting the survivor to other services, etc.)

Finally, we recommend collaborating with domestic violence advocates because our understanding of domestic violence is evolving, laws and resources change, and together we can do a better job of meeting survivors’ needs.

This tool was adapted from the Domestic Violence and Mental Health

Collaboration Project’s Family Law Toolkit for Attorneys.

The original version of this tool can be found at

<http://endgv.org/toolkits/family-law-toolkit-for-attorneys/>.



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2. Fawcett, J. (2010). *Up to Us! Lessons learned and goals for change after thirteen years of the Washington State Domestic Violence Fatality Review.* Seattle: Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. Logan, T. (2010). Research on partner stalking: Putting the pieces together. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, Department of Behavioral Science & Center on Drug and Alcohol Research. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Pearson, J.& Thoennes, N. (2000). New directions for child support agencies when domestic violence is an issue. Policy and Practice, (58) 29-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. DCS will attempt to collect child support from the parent who owes the support, if the custodial parent is receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or State Family Assistance (SFA). They will refrain from doing this if they find there is “good cause” to believe that establishing and/or enforcing child support may result in serious physical or emotional harm to the child or the parent. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Warshaw, C., et al. (2014). Mental health and substance use coercion surveys: Report from the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health and the National Domestic Violence Hotline. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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