

Lessons from One-Handed Nic

Steps Towards Operating an Effective Abuse Recognition and Prevention Program Begins with People

By Rachael Frost, CEO FROST ICED

The young woman struggled for a moment at the front of the crowd, trying to determine how to juggle both a microphone and the notes on her laptop. She settled the computer on the edge of a wine barrel and looked out across the large group gathered near sunset at a winery in the Temecula, California vineyards. She took a breath, steadied her voice, and spoke her first words in public about the day she walked out of her home to go to work and was greeted by her ex-fiance who opened fire on her with a shotgun, striking her three times.

“Long story short, I survived.”

Nicole, or as she calls herself “One-Handed Nic,” is an oncology nurse, a para-Olympic snowboarder, and the survivor of an attempted intimate partner homicide; an attack which ended in the suicide of her former boyfriend and the loss of her left hand. Her humor and dogged determination towards resiliency in the face of pain is inspiring. She went shooting on the first anniversary of the attack, calls the remaining lower portion of her left arm “Karen” (upon whom all things that go wrong are blamed), and she pursues her passions and work life with vigor. But she still struggles with all the unpacking that comes with such a large suitcase of trauma.

Nicole is the reality of domestic violence. But she is just one. As threat assessment professionals, corporations, schools, and agencies, how do we effectively address intimate partner violence when each story is different, and each ending may depend upon us? Let us explore four basic steps to creating a successful abuse recognition and response program for in person and virtual employees and clients.

1. Begin with People

People are complicated, entrenched with emotion and hope, have wide varieties of experiences, perspectives, realities (perceived or otherwise), and much more. Add in the layered history and dynamic of relationships, with their own versions of Power and Control, and we have a complex mother board of connections that are not simply solved with a “one-size fits all” employee assistance program, a cookie-cutter criminal justice system response, or an annual training for supervisors regarding abuse in the home and our employees.

Our engagement and resource programs must include multidisciplinary partnerships with a collective agreement and understanding regarding the challenges of intimate partner violence. Know the services and people in your area so you may solve problems together before they even occur. If you are a corporation or a school, get to know law enforcement, Family Justice Centers, other social service agencies, local grassroots support systems, etc. Discuss coordinated response plans and limitations. Knowing who to call in advance for support, for help, or even for shelter, not only quickly provides victims information and services, but it builds relationships between providers; relationships that can get things done in emergencies and beyond.

When building a program, “Beginning with People” also means looking at the regular patterns of disclosures and how people seek solace. People confide in those they trust and at work that means coworkers and immediate leadership, not ineffective supervisors. Building a complete workplace

violence program and beyond into any entity includes awareness, removing stigmas about trauma and assistance throughout your workplace, training supervisors how to effectively interview and accept information, and hiring and supporting effective leaders who create strong teams. If your workplace routinely encourages people to come forward with concerns, handles issues effectively and as openly and supportively as possible while still protecting victim confidentiality and administration liability concerns, the atmosphere will be more conducive to welcoming issues for solutions.

All program development success stories begin with an evaluation of your processes (from prevention through to response) and perspectives (how are these processes experienced by every angle) and determining where the foundation is cracked and broken so you can begin working on the repairs. Do this with your domestic violence program whether you are a law enforcement agency, corporation, school, etc. The process remains the same, the outcomes and needs are where the differences lie.

Let's throw in a twist: As you look at your program, how do you support someone like Nic in your environment? She may need adaptive technologies, a meeting with leadership to support and understand her recovery needs both short and long term, responsive coworkers who understanding the challenges for her returning to work. Supporting victims begins with – no surprise – the victim themselves. Our job as program developers and leaders is not to tell a victim what they need, but to create an environment that can positively respond to help a survivor become a sur-thriver.

2. Not Everything is as it Seems: The “Quarantine Effect”

The rise in concern regarding intimate partner violence during the pandemic has been well documented by the media, victim advocates, and the justice system. However, the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice determined that while all personal violence rose significantly in the first half of 2020, the rise in intimate partner violence reports during the quarantine were on par with previous years and the basic data did not identify with the public concern.¹

However, we know as threat assessment experts and professionals, we must also look at the landscape in which our data resides to determine the truth, in this case to discover the “Quarantine Effect” on domestic violence. While research may show that reports of intimate partner violence have not risen across the United States, simple media curiosity provides us ample evidence of “amplification,” where jurisdictions are seeing significant increases in intimate partner-related homicides and familicides. This is a window into the cases of violence that cannot be hidden behind closed doors forever, where the violence has eclipsed the concerns of where can a victim and her/his children go during a pandemic besides home, what will happen and how bad will it be after the police leave and there is not any escape, and their concern for the health of the perpetrator outside of the home or in the justice system.

Just one example of the true “Quarantine Effect” is Tarrant County, Texas which noted a 112 percent increase in domestic violence homicides.² One of those cases was Susan Sudduth whose husband strangled her with an electrical cord. Susan was not found for weeks due to the isolation experienced by everyone. Her body was only discovered after her husband confessed the murder to his brother. As a

¹ [NCCCJ - Impact Report: COVID-19 and Crime \(counciloncj.org\)](https://www.counciloncj.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NCCCJ-Impact-Report-COVID-19-and-Crime-2021.pdf)

² [17 people were killed in domestic violence in Tarrant in 2020 | Fort Worth Star-Telegram \(star-telegram.com\)](https://www.star-telegram.com/news/crime-and-justice/article238484100.html)

nationwide community we must jump out of the comfort zone where we do business as usual because it is in such an environment that all those who remain alive are suffering in silence.

According to the United States' Attorney's Office in the Northern District of Texas, Texas was home to ten percent of the domestic violence homicides in the United States in 2018.³ We should stop and acknowledge that for a moment: Ten percent. This staggering truth was even recorded during a year not crippled by a pandemic, social unrest, large-scale and polarizing political climates and more. All components which create unemployment and economic and emotional insecurity, all stressors that increase the tipping point towards familicide and other forms of violence. Having data just from Tarrant County in our discussion today, we must wonder what will our overall percentage of domestic homicides be in Texas at the end of 2020?

Knowing our increase in amplification events, recognizing we have so many workers and community members isolated within their homes, how do we create outreach and response? After implementing the recommendations under "Begin With People," we focus our efforts on replicating our program virtually to combat the reality that "everything is not as it seems." The pandemic has taught us that change can happen in an instant and we must pivot successfully to survive in business and in life. Virtual workers and community members have additional needs than those in our office and we must identify what each of those needs and challenges are and how we can help meet and overcome concerns.

Our current environment of change and experimentation is an opportunity for applying creative thinking to this problem. Virtual or socially distance work gatherings for support, training home delivery drivers in recognizing potential abuse and reporting guidelines, school lessons about teacher and student support for virtual learners and educators who are faced with violence, and much more. What safety concerns do you have to employ for your teams? Such as an online button to immediately wipe the screen and history clean or to end a conversation if an abuser walks in, safety plans for remote workers that have expressed past concerns, a danger word for all team members for use during meetings and calls if someone needs help and having supervisors with immediate access to addresses and jurisdiction phone numbers for assistance for each employee, and the options are many.

While these are just a few examples of how to address the Quarantine Effect and develop a strong abuse response program before incidents occur, all entities should begin with the evaluation of your mission, processes, and perspectives, while creating adaptive and innovative solutions to concerns.

Going back to our strong and independent friend Nicole. Keeping lines of communication open between a survivor (and those we may not yet know are survivors) and leadership is imperative to creating an environment where needs are met and people are valued. This also supports sharing potential safety issues and working as a team towards solutions.

Follow "Lessons from One-Handed Nic" as we finish our discussion with "Step 3: Adapt and Overcome" and "4. Someday is Today," coming soon.

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³ [Texas U.S. Attorneys Announce \\$18 Million in Domestic Violence Funding from DOJ's Office on Violence Against Women | USAO-NDTX | Department of Justice](#)