

*After a Femicide...*

*How to Raise Public Awareness About Domestic  
Violence After a Tragedy in Your Community*

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It's terrible when a femicide occurs in your community. The domestic violence murder of a woman and/or a child is an occurrence that often makes an entire community sit back and realize that, yes, domestic violence is everywhere, even in this seemingly peaceful community.

As a domestic violence program, it is your responsibility to raise public awareness about the lethality and prevalence of abuse in your community. There are many ways to do this, from letters to the editor of your local paper, to public service announcements on radio stations, to displaying MCBW's Clothesline Project at community events, to posters and flyers. The first step to ending violence against women and children is ending the silence and denial that surrounds such abuse. Your program can be a great asset in ending this violence.

While no one wants to have a domestic violence-related murder in their community, such a tragedy is an opportunity to raise the awareness in your area. Also, when a woman or child is murdered as a result of domestic violence, frequently the press either does not label it a result of domestic violence or engages in victim blaming. I have read press accounts which have said things like "He murdered his wife because he thought she was a lesbian," "By all accounts he was a good husband and father and neighbors speculate that he killed his wife and then himself because she wanted a divorce," or even mentions in the press that the murderer had been previously arrested for domestic abuse but no mention that the act of murder he committed was the ultimate act of domestic violence. In your role as a domestic violence advocate, you can educate members of the press in your area about violence against women and children.

## 1. *Before a femicide occurs:*

- Get to know the members of the press in your area. Who covers the police beat or your community for your local paper? Feel free to call this person up, introduce yourself, and offer yourself as a resource and someone she or he can call for an interview/quote if a femicide occurs in your area. You are the best resource a reporter can contact if something like that happens and the reporter should be nicely informed that if a woman or child is murdered in your service area that you need to be contacted each and every time before a story is written. Even if the reporter doesn't quote you in his or her story, you should be getting your side out. Remember that reporters want good, reliable sources. You can be that person.
- Make sure that your program has up-to-date and accurate information and resources. Have those resources available to fax to a reporter if he or she asks for it.
- Make sure that someone in your program is designated as the spokesperson for the press. It can be your director or someone else who is articulate and well informed on the issues. Have a backup spokesperson for times when the official spokesperson is out of the office or unavailable.
- Meet as a whole program to discuss what your official message to the press is if a femicide occurs in your community. What message do you want the members of your community to hear? Also discuss what to do if a reporter doesn't cover a femicide in the way in which your program wants her or him to do. What will you do? Contact the reporter personally? Write a letter to the editor?
- Try to line up a survivor or two in your community who would be willing to talk to reporters. Survivors can often be the most effective messengers about the danger and lethality of domestic abuse and how it does occur in your community.

## 2. If a femicide occurs:

- There are several ways your program might learn of a femicide in your community: 1) From a press account, 2) from a friend or family member of the victim, or 3) from other sources such as police, hospitals, etc.
- If a press account has not yet been written in your community newspaper, call the newspaper (ask for the Assignment Editor) and ask who has been assigned the story. If no one has been, politely ask why this story is not being covered. If someone has been assigned, talk to the reporter. Ask him/her when the deadline for the story is. Ask the reporter if you can get back to her or him. Do not say anything on the record yet.
- If a reporter contacts you, ask the reporter when his or her deadline is. Tell her or him that you will get back shortly. Do not say anything on the record yet. Do not let the reporter pressure you into giving a quote or interview before you are ready with your message.
- While talking to a reporter it is very important to remember that everything you say to her/him is on the record and can be quoted. If you want to say something that is off the record you need to ask the reporter if you can speak off the record. Do not say anything you don't want to be quoted on unless the reporter gives you permission to speak off the record.
- Gather everyone who is currently in the office for a **media caucus**. What is a media caucus? It's simply getting everyone together to decide what your official message in this case will be. What is the message that you want to deliver to the press and the members of your community? If you have already discussed this in advance, as mentioned in part 1, this will be a fairly speedy and easy process. Make sure you write down the main points of what you want to say to the reporter so that you have them for reference when you call the reporter back.
- Call the reporter back and deliver your message and also answer his or her questions. Try to stay on your message as much as possible.
- If the reporter has already done a story on the femicide but hasn't outwardly stated that the murder is domestic-violence related, feel free to nicely bring this up to the reporter. A good question to ask after a typical reporter's answer of "Well, we have no proof that there was domestic violence in this relationship," is "Wouldn't you consider a husband/boyfriend/partner/father/etc. killing his wife/girlfriend/partner/daughter/etc. to be domestic violence of the most extreme sort?"
- Try to have your program's message to the media be not only specific to the recent femicide but also be one of public awareness. Some messages you could use would be:
  - It is a terrible tragedy that \_\_\_\_\_ was murdered by her \_\_\_\_\_. Domestic violence is epidemic in Minnesota. In 2001, 33 women and 11 children were murdered as a result of domestic violence. We need to end the silence that surrounds violence against women and children. Only by ending silence and speaking out against domestic violence will tragedies like this be avoided.

- ▶ The recent tragic murder of \_\_\_\_\_ makes it absolutely clear how necessary services for abused women and children are in our community. It's devastating that the State of Minnesota cut the funding of domestic violence services by more than \$2 million in the last legislative session when women like \_\_\_\_\_ are being murdered at the hands of their loved ones.
  - ▶ People in this community don't want to believe that domestic violence happens here. It's understandable. No one wants to believe that a woman or child has been abused or murdered by a loved one. But our community needs to wake up and see that domestic violence does occur everywhere, even here. There are resources for battered women in this community, though, such as (and here is where you mention what your program does and any others in the area)...
- Ask the reporter if he or she will include in his or her article local resources for abused women and children, such as your program's crisis line and/or the phone number for Day One.
  - If a reporter covers your story in a way in which you and your organization feel is a good manner, send her or him a thank-you note. Everyone needs positive reinforcement!
  - If you are not happy with the coverage or feel you have been misquoted, call the reporter and correct him or her in a constructive way. Do not yell at the reporter or lecture him or her. Just make your point constructively and remind her or him that you are a resource when writing articles about domestic violence. You can also call that reporter's editor but that should be a last resort since your ultimate goal is to form a good working relationship with the reporter.

### 3. Holding a special event after a femicide:

- Consider having some sort of memorial activity in your community for the woman or child who was murdered such as a candlelight vigil or rally. If you feel comfortable doing so, invite the family and friends of the victim.
- Invite the press to your event with a faxed media advisory at least 24 hours in advance and a follow-up call the morning of the event. **See the sample media advisory at the end of this packet.**
- You could also display MCBW's Clothesline Project for such an event (we can usually get a clothesline to you within a few days via UPS, although you may not be able to get the most recent one on short notice). Call us at 651-646-6177 or check out our web site at [www.mcbw.org/clothesline.htm](http://www.mcbw.org/clothesline.htm) for more information about the Clothesline Project.
- You might consider inviting your one of your local state legislators to your event as well.
- After you have organized the event and the speakers, call them to ask for quotes of things they will actually say, to use in a press release. Write up the press release. **See the sample press release at the end of this packet.**
- If the press attends your memorial event, have press packets available for them. Include in the packet a copy of your media advisory, a press release, and information about your program and other domestic violence programs in your community. A copy of the latest Femicide Report would be a nice addition, too. You can find it online at [www.mcbw.org/femicide.htm](http://www.mcbw.org/femicide.htm).

- If you hold a memorial event and the press does not attend it, fax your local press a press release about the event and then follow up with a phone call. In some smaller communities, the local newspaper may allow you to write the article yourself. **See the sample press release at the end of this packet.**
- Make sure that your designated spokesperson is available to talk to the press after the event and can be reached after hours in the next few days.

#### 4. *Some final thoughts:*

- Please remember to send all press clippings related to the femicide to MCBW. We use press clippings to compile the annual Femicide Report and to track media coverage of femicides.
- Don't be intimidated to speak to the press. Remember that if a reporter is curt with you, it is often because she or he is on deadline and very busy. Also remember that the press needs you more than you need it. You hold the power in the working relationship.
- If you have any questions, call Danielle Kluz, MCBW Communications Coordinator at (651) 646-6177 or email her at [dkluz@mcbw.org](mailto:dkluz@mcbw.org).
- Good luck!

# The Women's Center of Anytown

1900 Main Street  
Anytown, MN 55109

For immediate release:  
June 19, 2002

Contact: Julie Smith  
(651) 555-1234 (office)  
(651) 555-4321 (cell)

## MEDIA ADVISORY

### **THE WOMEN'S CENTER OF ANYTOWN REMEMBERS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MURDER VICTIM MARY JOHNSON WITH CANDLELIGHT VIGIL**

The community of Anytown, Minnesota will gather at Anytown Park to honor the memory of Mary Johnson. Johnson, a resident of Anytown, was murdered by her husband, John Johnson, on June 15, 2002. A candlelight vigil will be held and community members will speak about Mary Johnson's life and tragic death as a result of domestic violence. State Senator June Stafford (D-Anytown) is expected to speak at the event, as well as family and friends of Mary Johnson. Staff members of the Women's Center of Anytown will be available at the vigil to answer questions and provide information about domestic violence.

**WHEN:** 9:00 p.m.  
Thursday, June 20, 2002

**WHERE:** Anytown Park  
Anytown, Minnesota

**PHOTO OP:** As a backdrop, 33 adult t-shirts and 11 children's t-shirts will hang from a clothesline. The t-shirts represent the number of women and children murdered in Minnesota in 2001 as a result of domestic violence.

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## **CANDLELIGHT VIGIL HELD IN ANYTOWN PARK TO REMEMBER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MURDER VICTIM MARY JOHNSON**

Hundreds of members of the Anytown community gathered in Anytown Park the evening of June 20 for a candlelight vigil to remember domestic violence murder victim Mary Johnson.

Mary Johnson, 38, was beaten to death by her husband John Johnson, 40, in their Anytown home on June 15, 2002. John Johnson had previously been arrested for domestic violence assault against his wife in 2001 but County Attorney Michael Peterson declined to take the case, citing insufficient evidence. "I am very disappointed that this man was not prosecuted for his abuse of his wife a year ago," said Susan Smith, Executive Director of the Women's Center of Anytown, a community domestic violence program, at the vigil. "Mary Johnson's death could have been averted if the system had taken action." John Johnson is now in custody and has been charged with second-degree intentional murder. Mary and John Johnson had two children who are now living with Mary Johnson's mother.

At the vigil, friends and family of Mary Johnson remembered her life and the contributions she made to the Anytown community. "She was always the first to help out for church functions and fundraisers," said lifelong friend Lucy Shields. "Her generosity knew no bounds." "She was there to listen to my problems and make me laugh. I miss her terribly," said her sister, Jessica Davis of Othertown, MN.

Mary Johnson's mother, Katherine Davis of Anytown, spoke about the silence of domestic violence. "I thought I knew my daughter so well," she said. "I had no idea that her husband was abusing her. If I had known, I would have tried to help her. Now I can't because Mary is gone."

State Senator June Stafford (D-Anytown) also spoke at the rally. "The system failed Mary. Our systems should ensure the safety and security of women and children in our community and, tragically, they did not."

Susan Smith reminded vigil attendees that help is available in the community. She and staff members of the Women's Center of Anytown, passed out brochures that described the services the center offers to abused women and children in the community. "Don't be afraid to get help," she stated. "It can mean the difference between life and death."

On display at the candlelight vigil were 33 adult t-shirts and 11 children's t-shirts hanging from a clothesline. The t-shirts represent the number of women and children in Minnesota murdered in 2001 as a result of domestic violence. After sundown, the vigil participants lit candles in memory of Mary Johnson.

"We won't forget you, Mary. We won't forget the way you lived and we won't forget the way you died," said Jessica Davis.

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