

Snapshot of Success: San Diego, California

“Every two minutes a woman is sexually assaulted somewhere in America”

“More than one million women are stalked each year”

“Nearly one out of three murdered women die at the hands of an intimate partner”

“America is responding”

Narrator: In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act to address the problems of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. This landmark legislation created new federal crimes and provided resources to help states, tribes, and local communities focus on victim safety and defender accountability. These resources have made a real difference. In San Diego, VAWA is helping expand the response of a community deeply committed to addressing domestic violence. San Diego began to address domestic violence in the late '70s with the efforts of women's groups, advocates, and battered women. In the '80s, the movement began to spread to other parts of the community.

Casey Gwinn, San Diego City Attorney: Well, if you look at where we were in 1985 and where we are today, the difference is dramatic. We've gone from a jurisdiction that had 26% of our homicides being domestic violence related, now to less than 5% of our homicides being domestic violence related. We've had almost a 75% drop in domestic violence homicides in the city of San Diego in the last 15 years. We've gone from waiting until we have broken bones and dead bodies, to intervening at the earliest possible stage to stop the violence before it escalates, and that shift has been dramatic. And it hasn't just been the criminal justice system, it's been the criminal justice system in partnership with the entire community. And it's been the criminal justice system listening to battered women's advocates and shelter advocates as to what we should be doing and then doing what they say.

Ashley Walker, Director, Department of Human Resources, City of San Diego: I think that one of the important factors in having this begin and be successful and be maintained over time was the fact that most of us came from social service mentality. But we took on more of a social justice mentality, in that we thought that this was more important than any one thing that we were doing. That we needed to have some sense of changing systems, of changing people's attitudes, of changing how people thought. If you did that, then that would change, of course, how they did their jobs and how they interacted. And we moved at this knowing that, well, first you're going to need to do a shelter. But understanding that you will have that shelter forever and you will fill it forever, unless you can change some of the attitudes that are the reason why women are in that shelter to begin with.

Narrator: One of the ways San Diego has changed attitudes is to build a grassroots network of people and organizations. San Diego's Domestic Violence Council has grown to include over 200 agencies that work collaboratively to address the problem.

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Gael B. Strack, Assistant Chief Attorney, President, San Diego Domestic Violence Council: In San Diego, we have the San Diego Domestic Violence Council. We are a grassroots organization made up of 600 individuals, over 200 organizations, and about 17 active committees. The Council is active and very much involved in the San Diego community to make change happen on behalf of victims of domestic violence. We get to share information; we advocate for change. We are working with a whole host of individuals and professionals. And so, I think together we are a very strong voice for victims of domestic violence. Individually, I don't think we would be as successful, but together and people know we are working together in a collaboration to make things work better.

Casey Gwinn, San Diego City Attorney: The people that work in this field have invested time in each other. So, if one relationship is lost or one person passes from the scene, there are so many other relationships that kind of hold us together, those relationships can't be underestimated. There are wonderful relationships in a battered, women's movement. There are wonderful relationships in a police department or a sheriff's department. There are great relationships among prosecutors or between judges. But it has to be the judge and the advocate. It has to be the prosecutor and the police officer. It can't be simply the people in this organization get along and the people in this organization. Because if that's all you have, you will end up in a jurisdiction where everybody is pointing fingers at everybody and there's nothing but conflict between the multidisciplinary parts of this system. That's really, I think, where we have succeeded. We have succeeded in prioritizing personal relationships between people who can then go out and make change.

Gael B. Strack, Assistant Chief Attorney, President, San Diego Domestic Violence Council: In San Diego, we're trying to build partnerships and we start the partnership between the police and the prosecutors right from the beginning. By the beginning I mean that prosecutors are at the police academy doing the training with our domestic violence detectives. We are training our new recruits on the domestic violence laws, the investigation, the Prosecution, we do practical exercises to make sure that they understand it. We are with the police from the time that they come into the academy. Prosecutors are requested to go on domestic violence ride-along. Our DV detectives will come here to the prosecutor's office and our prosecutors will go to the Domestic Violence Unit. We work hand in hand to build these cases because we're working together as a strong partnership, we have a 95% conviction rate.

Narrator: Though they have been successful at convicting criminals. San Diego's partnerships are built around a vision that is much more comprehensive. Everyone is focused on ending domestic violence. This means educating the public through media campaigns. It means building a coordinated community response. It means changing old attitudes and it means helping victims.

Lt. James E. Barker, San Diego Police Department: So, for instance, if I go to a scene and I see this woman who has been battered, what can I do for her? Sure, I can take the suspect, I can put them in jail, and I can do a real good job on documenting what occurred, and help Prosecution make a good case. But if I solve the problem, I may have prevented that person from getting hurt further that evening. But if I done anything else, probably not until we can really activate that system so we can get that victim some help, we can get that batterer some help and learn that these behaviors are unacceptable. And what it can lead to, it's not the cop that has to go in and work with these people all the way through, but knowing who can do that for them. And again, that's the collaborative effort. That's when we talk about the response teams, of getting people on board and getting them on board early to

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help these folks. That's the key, so I don't have to go back to that home anymore. That's the ultimate goal.

Narrator: One example of the power of San Diego's collaboration between agencies and law enforcement is the YWCA's hotline. The hotline was created to provide law enforcement officers with an efficient way of getting victims what they need, but it has become much more.

Kimberly Pearce, Director of Residential Services, YWCA: The VAWA money we get funds the hot line and I think that that's built a working relationship because now they see how well we can rely on the YWCA to get a client into a shelter quickly. Instead of having to sit and try and get a client into a shelter and taking hours and hours of detective's time. They know that they can just call us, and we can get to have them within a relatively short period of time. (*Incoming call - Operator: "Information, referral, hotline, may I help you?"*) One of the things that we were wondering is how much would the hot line get used? Because it was primarily set up for detectives. The rest of it is victims of domestic violence and social service providers. And we get over 400 calls a month, which, you know, that's significant. (*Incoming call - Operator: "We can certainly work with you on getting you safe transportation there, your safety is number one to us. Okay. So, if you just hold the line, someone's going to talk to you for a little while. I'll stay on the line with you. Okay. In case anything happens, we'll take the call back, we'll find you another shelter. Okay? All right. Just a minute. Okay. Go ahead. You're on the line with the Lennon's Resource Center*).

Gael B. Strack, Assistant Chief Attorney, President, San Diego Domestic Violence Council: When the VAWA funds came, we were already an established domestic violence unit. It gave us the opportunity to think outside of the box, to think outside of the lines. We decided that with the funds, we were going to enhance our domestic violence unit by focusing on specific areas. We wanted to learn more about teen relationship violence, so we did, we wanted to focus more on same sex domestic violence, we did, we wanted to learn more and educate ourselves and do a better job in the area of elder abuse prosecution and we did, we wanted to focus on stalking cases and develop our expertise there, and we did, and we also wanted to learn more and work better with our medical partners. They have so much information there to give us, and they're willing to give it to us, thanks to Dr. George Mclean. We are now experts in the area of prosecuting strangulation cases, and we're able to prosecute these cases even without an injury.

Casey Gwinn, San Diego City Attorney: VAWA had a profound impact on us because VAWA came into place at a time where we were organized at the grassroots level. We had the relationships, we had the beginnings, we had the protocols, but we didn't have the resources. Doing domestic violence work right is resource intensive, very resource intensive, because to do it right, you've got to put a lot of resources at the front end early in the cycle of domestic violence. You've got to intervene early at the misdemeanor level. Society spends the money on all of this. We just spend it on the back end where it's much more expensive, but you still need the money at the front end. That's what VAWA did for us. VAWA allowed us to put the money at the front end. It allowed us to say, we're going to build a fence at the top of the cliff instead of sending ambulances to the bottom of the cliff. VAWA allowed us to start building that fence. Here we are six years later, and the fence is built, domestic violence homicides are down dramatically, our recidivism rates are down dramatically in San Diego. We know that it's because the resources were provided to do the job.

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Narrator: San Diego has come a long way since the '70s. What they've learned is that it takes time and resources, and it takes a commitment to a step-by-step process.

Ashley Walker, Director, Department of Human Resources, City of San Diego: Things have changed dramatically since that time. I think that part of it has to do with the attitude about taking one step at a time when you start on something as momentous as changing how a community feels about violence against its women and kids and thinking that you're going to change that in order to help women yet unborn. That's a heady and awesome thing to think about. To approach it one step at a time is what we call biting the elephant. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, Meaning setting up the program, getting it stable enough, getting its funding stable enough so that when you think five years out, will that program still exist? The answer is yes. Then it's time to take another bite and to go in another direction. You do it systematically, you do it one step. And if you're forced two steps at a time and move forward, I think San Diego has done a wonderful job of taking one bite of the elephant at a time and convincing everybody that it was their elephant, that it didn't belong to one section of the community.

Casey Gwinn, San Diego City Attorney: I believe that this has become so important to me because other people invested themselves in me 15 years ago, I wasn't an advocate for domestic violence causes. When I began, I didn't even know what domestic violence was. I've been through Stanford undergrad and UCLA law school, and I never heard the phrase domestic violence. I didn't even know what it was. But people invested their lives in me and motivated me and caused me to realize how significant this was in impacting families, and it grabbed me. That's a challenge now for anybody that gets touched by this work is you can go touch somebody else. You can cause people to care. They need to understand the issue, but you can cause a lot of people to care and of course, the more change agents you have, the more impact you're going to make in the culture.

This program is dedicated to the survivors and victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking whose courage, strength, and commitment to these issues have inspired and informed us all.

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