

COLORADO MUNICIPALITIES

SPOTLIGHT

By Cheryl Swanson, Longmont LEVI coordinator

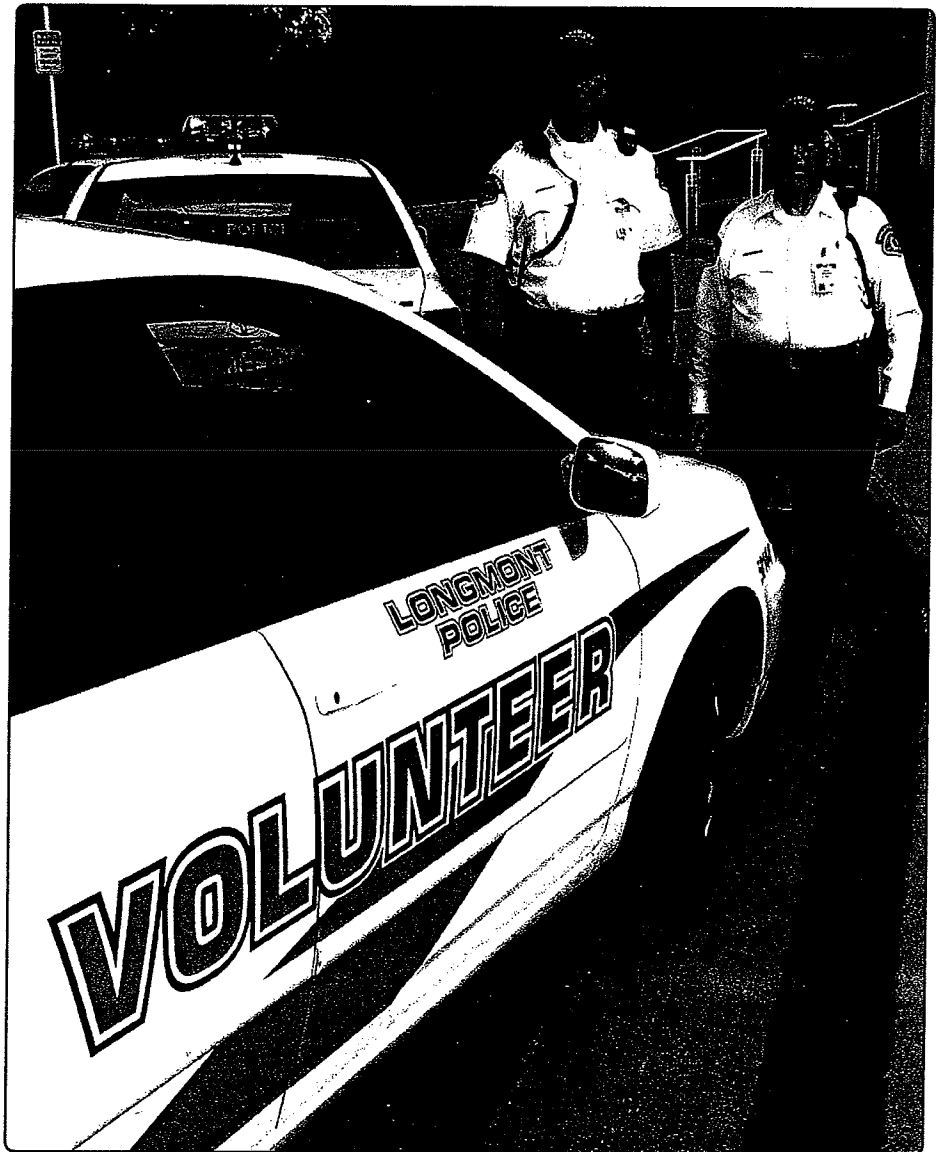
ENDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

IN 1998, THE LONGMONT COMMUNITY EXPERIENCED a series of particularly violent domestic assaults where victims had not sought help in leaving or changing a long-standing abusive relationship. That year, the community lost three women and two children to domestic violence. Before 1998, Longmont, which has a population of nearly 85,000, averaged one to two fatalities due to domestic violence in a typical year. Domestic violence remains the number one public safety issue.

As a direct result of these incidents, several members of the community, including the chief of police, the local women's shelter director and the director of the Boulder County Domestic Abuse Prevention Project, began to discuss the high level of domestic violence in Longmont. This group, calling itself LEVI (Longmont Ending Violence Initiative), began a comprehensive study in order to address the issue of domestic violence in our community.

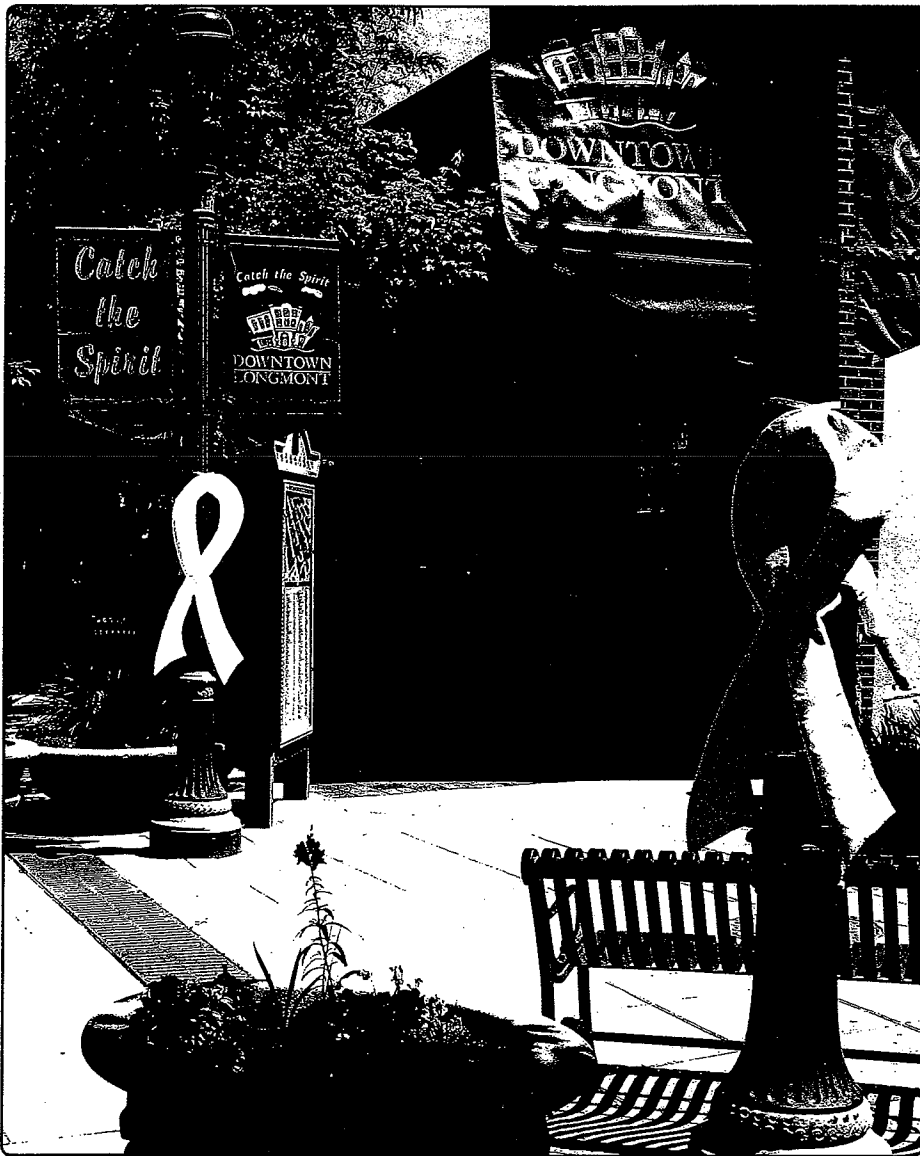
Barriers to overcome

The Longmont Police Department and the local domestic violence shelter have been recognized across the state as progressive resources in reducing domestic violence. This begged the question that if services were available, and officials were responsive, what was missing that kept victims from finding their way to help?



Ron Rio and Hermann Kleiner next to the Longmont Police Department volunteer car. Photo by Robin Ericson.

A COORDINATED COMMUNITY RESPONSE



Large white ribbons hang along Main Street in downtown Longmont June 8-22, 2008 as part LEVI's 2nd Annual White Ribbon Campaign, which is an effort of men working to end violence against women. Photo by Robin Ericson.

Research

To gain a wider understanding of the current state of domestic violence in Longmont, LEVI sought more information from its citizens and professionals in the community. Three surveys were conducted that targeted three populations of respondents: a survey of victims, a survey of police professionals and a survey of the general public. The findings reflected some significant differences in perspectives between these groups.

Domestic violence is a widespread problem that affects a greater percentage of the community than any other crime. It affects people from all professions, all income levels, all social strata and all cultures. Statistically, the Longmont Police Department has made more arrests than any other organization in Boulder County. Many professionals believe that this figure doesn't necessarily indicate that Longmont has more domestic violence, but that perhaps residents feel more comfortable in reporting it.

The Longmont survey findings suggest that there is no single strategy to approach the problem of domestic violence. It is a social problem that the entire community is responsible for stopping. Much of the research literature indicates that victims usually first seek counsel from trusted individuals (friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, etc.). Based on this, it would seem prudent for agencies working with domestic violence to educate collateral individuals about

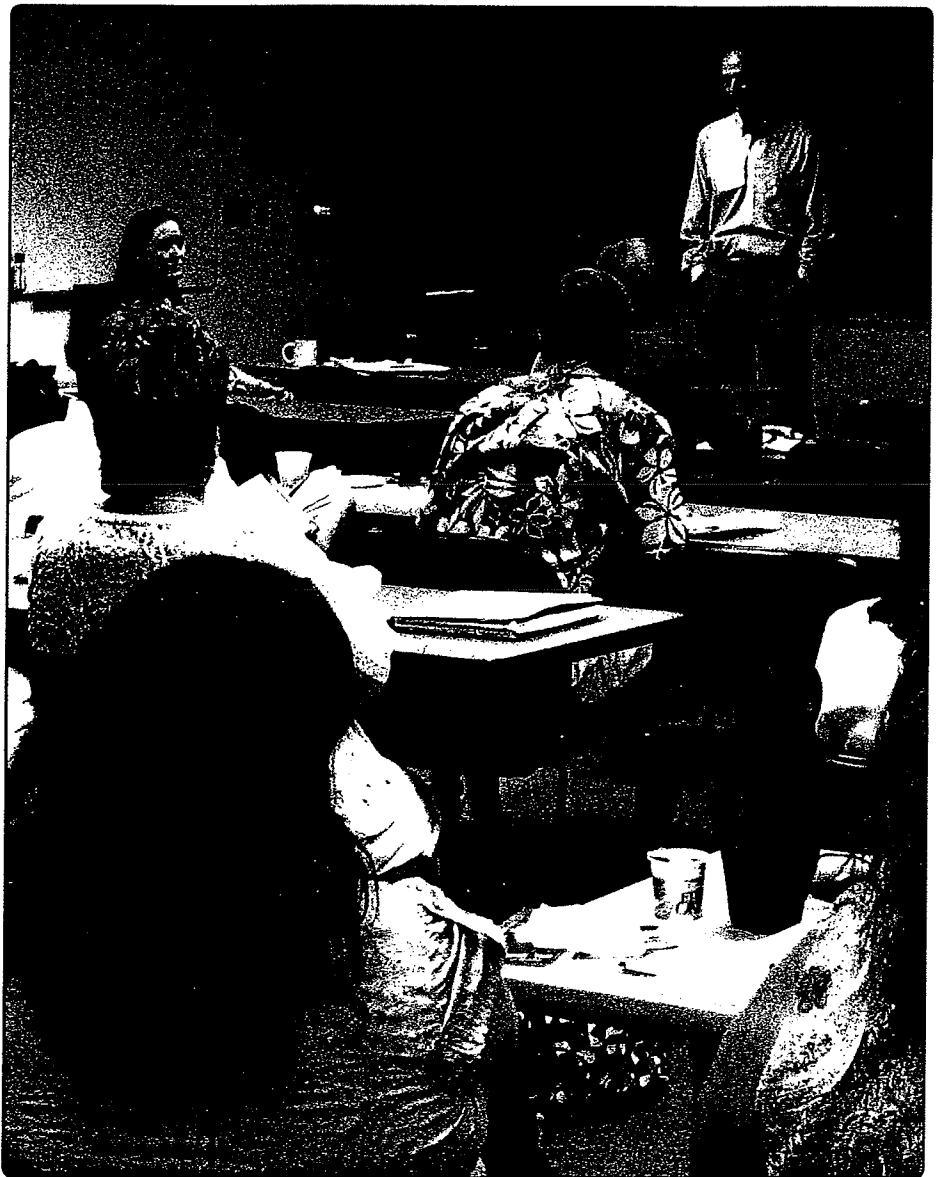
Residents needed to know that they could help and, armed with this knowledge, they could affect change.

what role they should take and what advice they should give to effectively guide victims and offenders to help.

Implementation

In early 1999, Police Chief Mike Butler, in partnership with a number of community agencies, began to discuss why it was that Longmont had so many resources, yet community members were not connecting with those resources. It was apparent from those meetings that two changes in the approach would better suit the community. First, Longmont needed to change the social behavior in the community. The message needed to be sent that domestic violence is an unacceptable behavior and would not be tolerated in that community. Residents needed to know that they could help and, armed with this knowledge, they could affect change. The second strategy is that change was needed to provide a way to assist victims that were falling through the cracks.

Representatives from city and county government, criminal justice, social service, nonprofit and privately-owned corporations became part of a coalition, one entity at a time. The first year, LEVI was comprised of three agencies; today, there are 23. The strategy is to deliver a message to the community that all citizens of Longmont are responsible for recognizing the signs of domestic violence and for taking the appropriate actions to curb it (i.e. calling the police, providing support to the victim, recommending resources, etc).



LEVI hosts four professional trainings each year on topics as they relate to domestic violence. These trainings are free and open to all professionals in the community. This picture was taken from the training "Men's Roles in Gender Violence Prevention." Photo by Robin Ericson.

This paradigm shift is centered on reframing domestic violence as a community issue versus an individual or police issue.

Today, local agencies acknowledge through this experience that not one agency can end domestic violence, that it has taken everyone to assist. The outcome of the collaboration the LEVI office, staffed by a coordinator. The City of Longmont believes so strongly in LEVI's efforts that it has and continues to donate office space, utilities, phone, computer and Internet access. LEVI's yearly budget is just over \$100,000 to sustain one full-time employee and significant prevention/education, public information and clearinghouse efforts.

All LEVI member agencies work together to serve as direction and insight in the daily and long-term goals and workings of LEVI. These agencies are committed to attending monthly meetings and serving on at least one of four sub-committees that meet regularly to do the work of LEVI. These committees are focused on prevention/education, public information, general operating and clearinghouse (access and referrals) efforts.

Innovation

LEVI is using a different paradigm to educate with the goal of heightening public awareness around domestic violence. This paradigm shift is centered on reframing domestic violence as a community issue versus an individual or police issue.

LEVI's emphasis is on the residents and employers of Longmont to change the way the community responds to domestic violence. Additionally, LEVI operates in a non-emergency capacity

and targets the community, not victims only. LEVI believes that the community must address all components of domestic violence, including how to stop the abuser from having multiple victims. LEVI does not teach "domestic violence 101" only; instead, they teach residents how to become part of the solution – how to take action and effectively respond to a domestic violence situation. LEVI believes that residents armed with knowledge will be able to assist a victim and/or offender prior to escalation of the violence.

The goal is to keep those who contact LEVI from falling through the cracks by effectively tracking the status of those asking for assistance. When a caller isn't finding appropriate services, the best course of action is discussed at the LEVI Clearinghouse Committee meetings. This group problem solves how to alleviate the specific challenge and what agency is best suited to meet this need.

LEVI continues to ensure local agencies are armed with effective research and training. Quarterly trainings are provided free to any and all community agencies that are interested in attending. This expansion of domestic violence training to all agencies, not domestic violence agencies only, is important because many times, these agencies are the first point of contact with a domestic violence victim or offender. If they are aware of the dynamics surrounding domestic violence, and the resources available, they have the opportunity to respond early and to connect the participants to services.

Since the development of LEVI, Longmont has gone nine years without a single domestic-violence-related death. Research indicates that victims typically do not report the violence until they have been battered approximately 10 times. By building community awareness around the dynamics of domestic violence and teaching how a community member can help, and by centralizing a domestic violence referral clearinghouse, LEVI believes that they can minimize the number of times a victim will be battered before they get help, therefore reducing the probabilities of serious injuries and fatalities.

Can it be replicated?

The LEVI program gets to the heart of what matters by targeting the root causes of domestic violence and reframing it as a community issue. This ultimately means that this is not solely an individual, family or police matter.

Domestic violence cannot be solved by treating the symptoms alone. While placing the emphasis on responding to domestic assault incidents is important and necessary, communities must go beyond crisis management to prevent domestic violence before it happens.

For more information and to review any materials or surveys, contact Cheryl Swanson, LEVI coordinator, at 303-774-4534 or cheryl.swanson@ci.longmont.co.us.