



# BALTIMORE POLICE DEPARTMENT



**Brandon M. Scott**  
Mayor

**Michael S. Harrison**  
Police Commissioner

June 16, 2021

Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council  
Room 400, City Hall  
100 N. Holliday Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

**RE: City Council Resolution #21-0039R  
Violence Against Women- An Overlooked Public Health Crisis**

Dear Council President Mosby and Members of the City Council:

The Baltimore Police Department (BPD) has reviewed Council Bill 21-0039R for the purpose of inviting the Police Commissioner of the Baltimore Police Department, the Health Commissioner of the Baltimore City Health Department, the Baltimore City State's Attorney, the Director of the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, the Executive Director of the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success, the Sheriff of the Baltimore City Sheriff's Office, and certain community-based organizations to appear before the Baltimore City Council to discuss the rise in violence against women and what strategies are being put in place to reverse this epidemic.

Thank you so much for allowing BPD to respond to this resolution. The Department takes violence against anyone seriously but we recognize that the community is impacted significantly when violence against women occurs. To ensure that these crimes are addressed swiftly and with the seriousness they deserve, BPD has developed a comprehensive approach toward investigating these crimes and supporting the victims. Within the body of this letter, we will provide some brief insight into how the Department addresses the various types of crimes committed against women and we look forward to providing more details during the hearing.

Within the Special Investigations Unit, two units have been established that are tasked with addressing the most heinous of crimes against women: the Family Crimes Unit and the Sexual Offense Unit. Both units take a victim centered and trauma informed approach that ensures that all officers and detectives conduct comprehensive investigations and display the utmost regard for the victim's physical and emotional well-being. We understand that a consistent response will also improve the public's perception of BPD as a thorough, caring and skilled department which further increases BPD legitimacy in the eyes of the community and the victims.

## **Family Crimes Unit**

The policy of the Baltimore Police Department Family Crimes Unit is to vigorously investigate domestic violence incidents, to seek protection for the victim, offer advocacy services, censure the criminal behavior and deter further violence. To meet these goals, the Unit will initiate investigations in a non-traditional manner to locate and identify households where domestic violence may be occurring. This is accomplished through:

- Review of certain categories of calls for service
- Review of incident reports
- Referrals from community associations, victim advocates, other government agencies

A domestic violence incident is defined as any violent acts between current or former intimate partner relationships between husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend and LGBTQ partners. In order to accurately identify and track domestic incidents, a computerized victim/assailant database has been established and is maintained to include the following information: central complaint numbers, crime/incident descriptions, date/location of the occurrence, relationship between the victim and abuser, victim's name, suspect's name and arrest information.

Recognizing that victims of domestic violence are frequently unwilling to testify against their abuser, cases are prepared so as to enable the State's Attorney's Office to proceed with or without the victim's testimony. To that end, investigation files include the following information:

- Prior incidents
- Photographs of visible injuries
- Identification of witnesses
- Medical records
- 911 audio
- Documentation of "excited utterances"
- Video taped statements from the victim
- Positive identification of suspects
- Weapons retrieved

To further support the victim, BPD Victim Advocates provide the following services:

- Provides crisis counseling
- Helps victims with obtaining Protective Orders by assisting with paperwork and accompanying victims to court throughout the entire process
- Accompanies detectives to the homes of victims to assist with follow up and the offering of services
- Helps the victim obtain emergency shelter and housing
- Transports victims to counseling sessions, social services and any other organization to assist the victim in becoming independent of their abuser
- Assists victims with signing up for VINE, Maryland Safe at Home address confidentiality program and the application for assistance from the Criminal Injury Compensation Board
- Provides each victim with a dangerousness/lethality assessment which was designed by nationally recognized expert, Jacqueline Campbell, PhD, of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

## **Sexual Offense Unit**

The mission of the BPD Sex Offense Unit is to provide justice and support for victims of sexual assault, identify and remove offenders and conduct professional and consistently thorough investigations. To that end, the Unit is responsible for handling the following investigations involving victims who are 16 years of age or older: rape and attempted rape; 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree sex offenses; and other complicated cases as deemed necessary.

The victim is the most important part of the investigation and is treated as such. The Unit prioritizes the privacy, confidentiality and well-being of the victim. To ensure the best possible care of the victim and a successful outcome of the case, detectives take the following steps:

- Work with the victim to determine if they would like the assistance of a victim advocate or any other services. If the victim wishes to have a victim advocate, the advocate is invited to attend any interviews with the victim and to provide insight into the needs of the victim including transportation, medical care, etc.
- Ensure that the victim is safe and is provided the appropriate medical attention, if needed
- Acknowledge that victims are never responsible for the crimes committed against them and that offenders are always responsible for their crimes
- Limit the number of times the victim has to talk about the assault
- Interviews of the victim must be conducted patiently, skillfully and tactfully to ensure the victim's long-term health and well-being
- Victims are not interviewed in suspect interrogation rooms, but specially designed rooms within SOU that are peaceful and comforting
- When possible, detectives escort the victim through the crime scene so that the victim can identify the suspect's movements, items he touched and any property he may have left behind
- All rape kits are analyzed.

## **Patrol response to Sexual Assault Calls**

Although there are specialized units who are tasked with investigating and tracking serious incidents of sexual assault, all BPD members have received comprehensive training that has been developed in conjunction with the Department of Justice and our federal Monitoring Team. Since patrol officers are often the first to interact with the victim, they have been trained to treat all victims with respect, patience, compassion, and professionalism and to refrain from expressing blame, judgment or disbelief. All reported rapes and sexual offenses are to be fully investigated in an unbiased way. Moreover, officers have been taught to follow an offender-focused strategy to scrutinize the actions of the offender rather than the victim who may be traumatized. They must also offer access to advocates who can provide much needed support.

## **Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS)**

Not all crimes against women are committed by intimate partners. To systematically address overall violence in the community, BPD is working with MONSE and the State's attorney's Office to launch the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) which is an evidence-based initiative designed to reduce serious violence. Also known as focused deterrence, the strategy works by engaging directly with those most intimately involved in and affected by violence, leveraging an intentional collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and community members who collectively co-sign and deliver an anti-violence message to stop the shooting. The GVRS message is grounded in the following core tenets:

- Every person and community needs and deserves to be safe;
- Violence is often driven by a very small number of groups and people.

- To increase safety, we must collectively focus on that small number of people in order to support them in their daily lives, communicate community norms in support of everybody's safety and success, and where necessary create swift, certain, and legitimate sanctions for violence

This strategy will reduce gun violence overall and will certainly reduce the number of women who are affected by these types of incidents.

BPD fully supports City Council Resolution 21-0039R and looks forward to a robust discussion on this important issue. Thank you for allowing us to comment on this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,



Michelle Wirzberger, Esq.  
Director of Government Affairs

cc: Natwana Austin, Executive Secretary of the Baltimore City Council  
Natasha Mehu, Director of Mayor's Office of Government Relations  
Nina Themalis, Special Assistant and Legislative Liaison, MOGR  
Eric Melancon, BPD Chief of Staff  
Andrew Smullian, BPD Deputy Chief of Staff