



CHANGING SYSTEMS
TRANSFORMING LIVES



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: WASHINGTON

Across the country, communities are disarming domestic violence offenders by implementing and enforcing firearm prohibitions in domestic violence cases. Leaders and innovators in these communities have developed pragmatic and responsible policies, protocols and practices directed at all aspects of firearm surrender and seizure.

BWJP

State of Washington

Since 2014, Washington state law has required individuals served with domestic violence protection orders to give their weapons to police; however, most were not obeying these court orders. In 2016, 56% of firearm surrender orders in Seattle were completely ignored. A \$1 million appropriation from the City of Seattle and King County allowed for the creation of the Regional Domestic Violence Firearms Enforcement Unit to improve compliance with firearm surrender orders. The Unit consists of 12 people, including Seattle Police Department officers, King County Sheriff's Office deputies, a Seattle Assistant City Attorney, and King County Deputy Prosecutors, paralegals, and victim advocates. The Unit manages the data entry, service, tracking, and enforcement of the surrender orders as well as the receipt, storage, and return of surrendered firearms across King County. The dedicated staff meet regularly to review surrender orders from the court and target the most urgent cases.

It can be complicated to figure out if someone owns a firearm. You can ask individuals directly, but relying on the honor system could have the consequence of leaving victims at risk. The State of Washington tracks purchase histories, but only for licensed gun stores, not gun shows or private party sales. The history that is available about purchases and concealed carry permits is not readily available to the judge presiding over the protection order case. Prosecutors can access this firearms history information, but prosecutors are not parties to protection order cases; it is a civil matter between the individual seeking a protection order and the person being restrained. The prosecutors in the new Unit now appear at these civil proceedings to ensure that the presiding judge has all available information about the respondents' firearm history.

The Seattle Police Department has tasked a Sergeant and four additional detectives with the responsibility of serving all protection orders in the City of Seattle. In the first 6 months of 2018, 67 orders to surrender were issued in 527 protection orders. The officers attempt to have respondents surrender firearms at the time of service of the order. Approximately 10% of respondents immediately surrendered firearms to the serving officer. The Sergeant conducts a risk assessment when she receives a protection order. If the high-risk criteria are met, the order is served with the assistance of the SWAT team. If the high-risk protocols are not required, the team attempts a soft approach, armed with all the information about firearm possession from the purchase registry as well as information provided by the petitioner. The team is keenly aware that if they are serving a temporary order, they will likely have to return at a later date to serve a permanent order, so establishing a respectful, professional, and calm rapport with the respondent is beneficial.

The success of the Regional Domestic Violence Firearms Unit has been immediate and significant. The number of firearms recovered by the Unit between January 1, 2018 and November 30, 2018 was 466. This number reflects firearms recovered by law enforcement, not firearms voluntarily surrendered by respondents who received information from the Unit on how and where to surrender. To place this number in context, 124 firearms were turned in during all of 2016.

To view a video created by King County on the process of surrendering firearms, [click here](#).