



After more than 15 years as a communications professional, I began to serve as a volunteer in the field of domestic violence. In 2010, after relocating from Center City Philadelphia to Southern New Jersey, I wanted to connect with my new community and took advantage of the opportunity to volunteer for three local police departments on behalf of Providence House, a domestic violence agency. As a member of the Domestic Violence Response Team (DVRT), I respond to calls to the stations to advocate for victims of domestic violence who seek restraining orders.

The 40-hour training included intensive sessions on cultural competency that blew my mind. They required a sophistication, emotional intelligence, and sensitivity that would help us as responders to leave our biases at the door before we entered a room to meet with a victim. These trainings made inherent sense to me—they felt like a continuation of learning that had begun over the course of years in my early twenties in a therapy group that was diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and class. In that room I had begun to see through a wider lens and learn how to connect with others, to speak openly but also respectfully, and to understand and own my privilege.

As I completed my DVRT training, I came to see that being a responder required the perfect intersection of skills I'd been building throughout my career: an ability to be kind and compassionate, to listen and quickly assess needs, to condense complex information in an accessible way, and to help the client to plan effective short-term strategies. My experience of the work began to shift from intimidation to gratification. In the months that followed I grew even more passionate about learning all I could and improving my skills to advocate for clients in a wide range of situations. At times this would require the even more harrowing experience of speaking with a victim in the hospital in the wake of an incident.

The following year I was asked to lead my three-town team of 10 responders, and since then I've enjoyed training and mentoring the dedicated volunteers who serve along with me. Within a few months, in 2012, Providence House also invited me to serve as a legal advocate at the Burlington County Courthouse. In this even more intensive role, I spend one morning each week meeting with clients preparing for restraining order hearings.



Given that the vast majority of plaintiffs aren't represented by attorneys, the court relies on our program to advise them of their rights, explain court procedures, and provide basic information about the dynamics of domestic violence and available social services. On some days this means meeting with up to ten individuals before court, accompanying them in the courtroom, and offering as much support as time allows in the wake of the court's decision.

This work has become meaningful in ways that I could not have imagined. I'm of course now highly attuned to the epidemic that is domestic violence—the depiction in the media but also at a personal level, having seen the toll it takes on individuals and families across the entire spectrum of class, education, and socioeconomic status. I have new levels of compassion for women (and men) who have reason to feel the court system has failed them, but I've also seen individuals transformed by the education and counseling services my agency provides.

I'm humbled by the dozens of restraining order cases heard each week in my county alone, and I'm routinely in awe of my supervisors and the kindness, compassion, and wisdom they display—walking a delicate line between social work and advocacy. This work has raised the bar for my standards of what it means to empathize, listen, articulate, and problem solve. I know it has improved not only the quality of my work as a consultant but also how I engage—passionately and compassionately—with an expanding landscape of communities in person and online.