

## An Interview with...

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**Q: Can you describe your role as Corrections Unit Supervisor?**

A: I work for the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation; there are maybe 300 people in the adult division where I work. We're a large jurisdiction, we have about 35 law enforcement agencies and 42 municipalities with Minneapolis being the hub and the largest city. I supervise 14 probation officers and two support staff. Also, I serve on a number of coordinating community response committees, which has helped build some of the connections. Some of the enhancements we have been able to make are because of the participation on our family violence coordinating councils and various committees and the fatality review team.

**Q: How does your department respond to stalking cases?**

A: It is about perseverance rather than perfection. The reality of it is so few cases are actually charged and convicted of stalking, most of the time it is other stuff. Our investigators run all the criminal history, make an effort to speak to the victim, meet with the perpetrator to talk with them, put together the presentence investigation, and then it goes back to court for sentencing. With all of our cases, even the ones we aren't certain are stalking, we ask people to do a couple things. They fill out an identification sheet, which includes all the vehicles that they own and the plates, where they live, where they were

and so we really have the 411. We hold them to that information and also we make sure we have, and that we are, clear on what are, if any, civil no contact orders as well the criminal no contact orders. We make sure we have identified what those are and we have a copy of them. We are very rigorous in maintaining and enforcing no contact orders. We make sure we have as much information as possible and when we approach the case.

**Q: Offenders engaged in stalking behavior are often convicted of crimes other than stalking (e.g. assault, property damage, burglary, etc.). How can a community corrections officer identify when they are supervising a stalker?**

A: The first thing you want to do is look at what orders there are regardless of whether it is burglary or assaults or damage to property. Look at the history and any violations of the specific court order. It may not say "violation of order for protection," but maybe you see something in the police record like "nuisance calls." Figure out where the perpetrator lives and where their current victim, or maybe a past victim, lives and try to run police reports against those addresses. Try to see what you get by running the names. It might be coded as "nuisance" or "unwanted party" but is actually a violation of some sort of no contact order. Those police reports where victim says, "I have an order for protection," and, "I have a no contact order from district

court as part of a criminal case,” those are really red flags.

The second thing is victim contact; you have to ask about the stalking issue, such as:

- What worries you?
- When did you last see him?
- Where did you see him?
- Is there any of his friends or family you are fearful of or you are worried may contact you?
- Are there other places or times or where he just seems to turn up?
- Has he been at your house even though he knows he's not supposed to?
- Has he been somewhere else where you've been concerned, like your children's school?

Also, ask the victim or victims what is their understanding of the order. If we've done our due diligence and we have a copy of the order, whether civil order or criminal order, we can look at it and say, “All right. He's not supposed to contact you at all and is not soliciting your children's school” and she'll say, “well he's texting me all the time.” She may not understand what is exactly in an order, what right she has, or even where she reports it if it is happening. We talk about the behaviors and try to figure out what they look like, what their purpose is, and whether or not they're violating an existing thing. Identifying all of that is figuring out if it is part of a pattern of stalking.

**Q: What do you find most challenging about supervising stalking offenders? What do you think are the most pressing needs of community corrections officers to address stalking effectively?**

A: They don't see themselves as stalkers if a court never said that this is stalking behavior. It is a challenge working with your offender client to get them to understand that what they're doing is stalking. “If you are ignoring these court orders, you are stalking.” They are so persistent. Sometimes, in their mind, there is

a very tight rationale for what they're doing and you figure out how to break through that. They're always harder clients work with. Another challenging thing is that we don't really have a screening tool. We use a domestic violence screening instrument. There are a couple questions in there that could be interpreted to be indicative of stalking, but it doesn't come up as a risk factor on its own. If I'm working for the Department of Corrections that uses a validated tool that doesn't really address the stalking issue then this offender is going to come out looking like low risk. The absence of a screening, or useful tool, that really teases out that information is a problem. I think many stalking cases are overlooked in current correctional evidence-based practices.

**Q: Are there any innovative or emerging tools or resources community corrections officers could utilize to assist in supervising stalking offenders?**

A: I think that some of the resources we have found to be really helpful have to do with connections to law enforcement that we never used to have. About 10 years ago, in the city of Minneapolis, we were able to put together a plan whereby the city of Minneapolis every night ran their database against the Hennepin County Department of Corrections database. We would get a computer-generated email the next morning, and it would say, “John Jones had Minneapolis police contact at 23:55 hours last night at the corner of 14th and Bryant Avenue in North Minneapolis. He was a suspect.” Alternatively, it might say he was the victim or he was a witness in a given case number and it would say for more information contact the Minneapolis PD. This was huge, because suddenly if our offender was somewhere at a certain time and he came to police attention we had a little record. I don't know if we would have ever known about it otherwise. That is sort of an emerging thing with us; is those police database/probation database connections.

**Q: What role can victims play in the supervision process?**

A: I think the most important thing is that they be safe because many stalking cases are sometimes the highest risk cases. I want them, first off, to be safe and I want them to work with a skilled advocate. The second

piece, if they can and when they can, is to report the violations. The reality is that we can be aggressive on violations only if we know about them. If we can, we'll figure out a way to substantiate them without putting the victim at worse risk. Reporting the violations is huge if we are going to be effective in dealing with it.

We work very extensively with law enforcement and prosecutors. Even though they may not be charging these cases, they need to be in the courtroom if only to take the offender client back on violation and assist us with that. You cannot be effective in addressing these cases if you do not have the collaborations. ■

**Q: What advice do you have for other community corrections officers who are working with stalking offenders and victims?**

A: Be observant. Watch those little things. What does the person say when they're in your office? How did they get to your office? Where did they sleep last night? What are their patterns? You need to connect the dots. In some cases, you might need to be really specific. "Where do you live? Where did you sleep last night? Where do you generally sleep? Where do you work? When did you go to work? How do you get to work?" You know the little things that are really kind of tricky and knotty. Honestly, I think probation officers need to be more aggressive. I think many times probation officers get beat up by the court system. They take back a violation and the judge does not give it much credence; we haven't done enough to educate that judge. Find an advocate who specializes in stalking. You'll feel much better handing your victim to somebody who understands stalking and has a way to address it.

**Q: How closely do you work with law enforcement, prosecutors, victim service providers, or other allied professionals on stalking cases?**

A: Most of the municipalities within Hennepin County have some sort of advocacy agency they contract with. There are probably four or five advocacy agencies that work in this county. We give victims both a statewide number for a domestic violence hotline and an advocacy number for the community in which they live. We have just a handful of advocates who specialize in stalking. We will sometimes say to the victim, "I think you should go to this agency and ask for this person because she is very knowledgeable..." Therefore, you work with victim service providers.