

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

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Amber Keith-Drowns has been assisting people experiencing domestic violence or intimate-partner abuse for over 21 years; most practitioners in her field burn out within four years. Unfortunately, Amber's tenacity has its genesis in family tragedy - her grandmother died as the result of interpersonal-family violence. I frequently say that most people in the law enforcement profession have their "WHY," and Amber is no exception. She keeps her grandmother's photo on her desk as a visible symbol of her motivation.

Every day, Amber reads deputy reports and follows up on domestic disturbances, sexual assaults, child abuse situations, and anything a patrol deputy indicates might benefit from her expertise. She then processes any paperwork related to domestic violence protective orders (DVPO), and she communicates with clerks, judges, and involved advocates. She also provides services to people who call or walk into the office requesting assistance, information, or advice related to domestic violence.

Some people are surprised that domestic violence and intimate-partner abuse affect both men and women and occur across all demographic categories, professions, and socioeconomic levels. Violence, of course, includes physical assaults of some sort, whereas abuse involves intimidation or the manipulation of power and control through mental, emotional, financial, or other means. Many people know something is unhealthy about their relationship, but because they have not been physically assaulted, they aren't sure how to characterize their situation. Such people have what Amber calls "lightbulb moments" in her office when they recognize an abusive relationship can exist even in the absence of bruising or broken bones. In other words, domestic violence is one form of an abusive relationship, but it is not the only one.

A DVPO is also known as a 50B, a term which refers to the chapter in the North Carolina General Statutes governing civil actions related to domestic violence. Although it has limitations, a 50B is a powerful tool in the fight against domestic violence. These restraining orders can require an abuser to stay away and have no contact with the victim. The defendant might be ordered to leave the shared residence, and the victim may receive temporary custody of children, at least until a safety plan can be established. In 2022, our Crisis Unit filed 254 DVPOs, assisted with 110 filed by others, and provided consultation, enforcement, or ancillary service related to 108 DVPOs from other counties and states.

Of course, not everyone we help needs, wants, or qualifies for a 50B. Therefore, the Crisis Unit provided information and referral, advocacy, assistance with criminal warrants, emergency response, and other forms of supportive services to 1,272 additional people last year.

Two full-time law enforcement officers assist Amber. Deputy C. Faircloth has primary responsibility for serving and enforcing DVPOs and/or release conditions established by a judge in a criminal matter. Faircloth also monitors the communications of detention center residents who have been ordered not to contact their victims. Often, newly arrested people make a phone call to the victim in their case almost immediately upon entering the facility. Many continue to do so, despite judicial orders

prohibiting such contact and multiple phone system warnings advising that all calls are monitored and recorded!

Deputy C. Miller provides supplementary services through the EASE program, an acronym for Empowerment, Advocacy, Safety, and Enforcement. A Governor's Crime Commission grant supports this program. Who wrote the grant application? Why, Amber, of course! Functioning as a liaison with the District Attorney's Office and the District Court Judges who hear these cases, Deputy Miller communicates with victims and collaborating agencies, addresses safety and lethality concerns, and facilitates supervised custody exchanges.

The National Advocate Credentialing Program recently certified Amber as an Advanced Comprehensive Victim Intervention Specialist in domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and human trafficking. Beth Posner, Clinical Associate Professor at the UNC School of Law, wrote a letter in support of Amber's application for this credential. She said, "Amber creates the docket and sits next to the clerk and the judge, demonstrating the profound role advocacy can play in a courtroom when an advocate has earned the respect and admiration she has within our civil and criminal justice system." Moreover, the Hillsborough Exchange Club, an organization dedicated to the prevention of child abuse, paid the fee for Amber's credentialing application and provides emergency supplies for victims. This robust community support speaks volumes.

In any emergency, call 911. If you are not in immediate danger, but experience violence or abuse within your relationship, contact our Crisis Unit at (919) 644-3050 or by clicking the Crisis Unit tab on our homepage (www.ocsonc.com) and selecting "Request Crisis Unit Contact." Walk-in service is also available Monday through Friday. Amber and her team are ready to help.