



# Court Watch and Firearms

Framework and Lessons Learned from Three Communities

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## Introduction

Court watch programs, in various forms, have existed in the United States since at least the early 1970's.<sup>1</sup> Though the focus of court watch programs may be varied, they all generally “serve to highlight the realities of our legal system by recording data, uncovering stories, identifying trends, and highlighting problems.”<sup>2</sup> A cornerstone of the U.S. judicial system is that court proceedings are generally presumptively open to the public. Court watch programs operate by having someone from the program observe proceedings, either in person or virtually. Observers are often looking for and noting a particular procedure or outcome of the court but may also be conducting general observation.

Communities around the country are using court watch programs as part of their strategy to reduce firearm-involved domestic violence. Here, we highlight how programs in three communities (Spokane, WA; Montgomery County, MD; and Madison, WI) are leading firearm-focused court watch efforts and the lessons they have learned so far.

# Spokane, WA

## Background

Spokane's court watch program began in 2024. It is housed under the Spokane Regional Domestic Violence Coalition (SRDVC), a nonprofit organization that brings law enforcement, government officials, victim advocacy groups, treatment providers, school representatives, and family services together to address domestic violence. Spokane's court watch program began as part of the community's work under OVW's Firearms Technical Assistance Project (FTAP) grant, and, thus, had a firearm focus from the outset. They aimed to use a court watch program to assess how consistently courts were addressing firearms issues by asking about firearms in civil protection order court and following up to ensure that relinquishment occurred as ordered.

## Structure and Activities

Spokane's court watch program recruited volunteers via their local university, social media, coalition meetings, and other available outlets to observe civil protection order hearings. Before the volunteers attended court, they received training from domestic violence experts at the SRDCV on the nature and dynamics of domestic violence, information about how the court process works, and instructions for filling out the court watch data collection form. Practical training followed, which included attendance at a live hearing, via Zoom, so that the training group could observe together and then discuss how each person filled out the form. The purpose of this exercise was to achieve as much consistency as possible in reporting. The Coalition also made data collection and reporting as easy as possible for volunteers – after initially starting with paper forms that volunteers had to scan or fax in, they quickly moved to an online form that is submitted electronically.

In the initial year of the court watch program, volunteers observed approximately 100 cases, and 79 of those cases fit the criteria (intimate partner domestic violence) to submit a data collection form. They attended hearings virtually via Zoom and, per their court watch protocol, used a generic court watch Zoom account and turned cameras off to preserve observer anonymity.

### **Spokane's court watch effort gathered data in several categories.**

- (1) What questions judges ask about firearms during the hearing, such as:
  - a. Does the respondent own firearms?
  - b. Has the petitioner ever been threatened with a firearm?
- (2) What instructions judges give to the respondent once an order is entered, including:
  - a. Do they clearly communicate what behaviors, including firearm possession, are prohibited?
  - b. Do they tell respondents how they are to relinquish the firearms currently in their possession?
- (3) Victim safety considerations, such as:
  - a. the judge connecting petitioners to an advocate and/or
  - b. encouraging petitioners to come back to court if needed.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

SRDVC's court watch leadership attributes the early success of the program to their good working relationship with the court. They approached court watch as a partnership with the court and invited judges and officials to give suggestions for data points. This approach created buy-in and a desire for feedback from the court. They also noted the need for ongoing connection and information-sharing as new judges take the bench.

Recruiting and coordinating volunteers has proven to be time-intensive for Spokane's court watch program. Even when they have a group of people who are interested in volunteering, they must be vetted, trained (as described above), and then consistently able to attend dockets, sometimes on short notice. Coordinating all of this requires a significant amount of staff time that can be difficult if it is not someone's primary job responsibility.

As court watch leadership in Spokane finished their first year and looked back on the progress made, they also set goals for the future. They would like to not only continue the program's current activities but also expand the data that is collected and the analysis they are able to perform.

For more information about antiviolence efforts in Spokane, check out the website for the [Spokane Regional Domestic Violence Coalition](#).

## Montgomery County, MD

### Background

Court Watch Montgomery is a non-profit organization designed specifically to observe domestic violence court proceedings, identify gaps, and promote systems change. Since 2011, they have observed more than 11,000 domestic violence-related civil and criminal court proceedings. Their current focus is on civil protection order hearings. Court Watch Montgomery recognized that firearms played a significant – and particularly dangerous – role in the cases they were seeing and decided to make firearms a focus of their efforts. In late 2023, they published a report specifically about firearm removal in protective order cases, describing the processes that are currently in place and giving suggestions for improvement.

### Structure and Activities

As an organization with a small staff, Court Watch Montgomery leverages volunteers to perform most court observations and data entry. Volunteers are recruited through outreach events (e.g. volunteer fairs), posting on websites, presentations at universities, and referrals from partner organizations. Training for the volunteers occurs in five steps: (1) orientation to the organization (2) an overview of the protective order process (3) an explanation of forms and data collection (4) practice sessions using recorded hearings and (5) supervised monitoring in which new volunteers attend court with the staff data analyst who reviews the forms and discusses court with them afterward.

Volunteers always go to court in pairs to enhance the accuracy of their data. They record information on whether judges asked the petitioner if the respondent had firearms and whether the judge informed the respondent that they must turn in any firearms they currently have, in addition to refraining from purchasing or possessing any firearms for the duration of the order.

Investing in an on-staff data analyst was important to the project's growth. The analyst reviews the forms after volunteers complete them to ensure consistency and accuracy of the data collected, then analyzes the data after it is entered into their database.

Court Watch Montgomery publicly releases an annual report that contains data about their observations and perceived gaps that exist in the protection order process. They send the report directly to a wide range of stakeholders, including the chief judge, and post it on their website. They have also released reports that focus on particular aspects of the protection order process, such as the implementation of firearm-related best practices.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Because they have a small staff and rely on volunteers, Court Watch Montgomery is careful to narrowly define the focus of their program to not only fit their goals, but also to remain within the confines of what is feasible with the resources they have. For instance, they have chosen to focus largely on protective orders as of late. They simultaneously think strategically about additional focus points—like protective order compliance dockets and other proceedings—which the program can prepare to expand into with additional resources. Choosing a focus that fits within an organization's mission and resource limitations is critical to success.

As a non-profit organization, Court Watch Montgomery receives funding from a variety of sources and tries to approach fundraising creatively. In addition to applying for grants from foundations and other entities, they have explored corporate sponsorship programs and giving circles. Sometimes the data they gather in court helps identify potential funding sources that are outside of their normal scope. Court Watch Montgomery was strategic in building their board of directors with people who have particularly helpful skills (such as grant writing), and the board is hands-on in assisting the organization in their areas of specialty.

More information about Court Watch Montgomery, including their latest reports, can be found on their [website](#).

# Madison, WI

## Background

Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS), a non-profit victim advocacy organization in Madison, WI, originally began court watch work in 2003 as a complement to their direct victim services. They restarted the effort in 2021, after the local coordinated community response group identified court watch as a priority. One of their primary concerns is consistency within the restraining order court, particularly because a total of 17 judges hear restraining order cases in their jurisdiction. In October of 2024, they began a year-long court watch with a focus on firearm orders and procedures.

## Structure and Activities

The DAIS court watch program has relied heavily on volunteers to observe court and collect data. They have recruited many volunteers from the local university, who then attend over 20 hours of training conducted by DAIS that includes foundational domestic violence training, two hours specific to the process of court watching, and several hours of shadowing and observation.

Court watchers track whether judges are consistently conducting proceedings and issuing orders that comply with statutes intended to protect victims from firearm-involved domestic violence.

DAIS also receives input from an advisory committee, which includes a culturally specific service provider and a sexual assault service provider. The advisory group is particularly helpful in setting court watch priorities that are rooted in the experiences of survivors in the community.

Each year, DAIS compiles the information and data they have collected through their court watch activities into a report that is published on the DAIS website.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

For DAIS, a critical piece of success was the established coordinated community response team. Having a broad range of professionals at the table was particularly helpful in creating the data collection tool, as law enforcement, attorneys, judges, and victim advocates could bring their particular lens to the document. The coordinated community response group has also been effective in identifying and fleshing out gaps that are brought to light by the court watch observers and developing ways to close those gaps.

Volunteers now enter information from their observations directly into a Google document, instead of filling out a paper form. This change was an improvement in both efficiency, as it reduced data entry time, as well as confidentiality, since volunteers were not carrying around paperwork containing victim information. Even with willing volunteers, the challenge of matching volunteers' availability with the court's limited hearing hours has meant that DAIS staff have primarily performed the observations of the firearm surrender hearings.

DAIS has taken two approaches with their annual court watch report over the years the program has been operable, either reporting the observed court actions attributable to the presiding judge or reporting the data without attribution to the particular judges. The motivation to issue anonymized was mainly due to concerns about potential retaliation towards litigants/clients. However, on the advice of their advisory council and other legal system stakeholders, they are returning to a report structure with attribution of reported court actions to the presiding judge. DAIS's primary goal in naming individual judges is to increase judicial accountability to victims of domestic violence. They have also found the practice valuable as a way to offer specific recognition and appreciation when judges are doing exemplary work. In the interest of transparency and fairness to the court, DAIS gave notice of the upcoming change in the previous year's report and also offered contact information for a DAIS staff member in case anyone had concerns regarding quote attribution in the next report.

The latest DAIS court watch reports can be found on their [website](#).

## Key Court Watch Takeaways

Although the court watch structure and process vary for these three communities, there are some common takeaways that other communities can use to begin or enhance their own court watch programs.

- When planning a court watch program, carefully consider both the goals of the program and the relationships that exist between the coordinating agency and the court. Some communities see court watch as a collaboration with the court while other court watch programs operate more independently because they feel it helps them to remain unbiased, but all options should be considered in the planning stages.
- Volunteers can be a great asset to a court watch program, but recruiting, training, and coordinating volunteers is time consuming. Court watch programs will have more success if they account for the time commitment accordingly, either by having staff complete some court observations themselves, by limiting the scope of their observations, and/or by allocating sufficient staff time to coordinate volunteer participation.
- Whether staff or volunteers were conducting the observations, court watch programs should design a clear, easy method for data collection and transmission. Good data collection practices save time and help ensure confidentiality is maintained. Programs should also have a plan, including staff time and technology resources, for analyzing the data collected by observers.

# Want to learn more? Contact us!

For more information on how to start or enhance a firearm-focused court watch program in your community, or to get connected with any of the court watch programs described above, contact us at the [National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and Firearms](#).

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# Endnotes

- 1 Gill N, Hynes J. Courtwatching: Visibility, publicness, witnessing, and embodiment in legal activism. *Area (Oxf)*. 2021 Dec;53(4):569-576. doi: 10.1111/area.12690. Epub 2021 Jan 28. PMID: 35875262; PMCID:PMC9291987.
- 2 [www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/on-demand/court-watching-programs-purpose-progress/](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/on-demand/court-watching-programs-purpose-progress/)