

# THE LETHALITY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

FIVE YEARS LATER

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

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CRIME



IMPROVING SAFETY FOR VICTIMS THROUGH  
A COORDINATED COMMUNITY RESPONSE

IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM AND CRAFTING A SOLUTION

# HOW THE LAP BEGAN

**From 2001 to 2010, at least 1,532 people died as a result of domestic violence in Pennsylvania.** Those are disturbing statistics, but they are not new to us.

The majority of those tragic deaths were abused women, but the statistics also included men, children, law enforcement officers, and perpetrators.

Something had to be done to curb the violence that left a wake of devastation in our communities. Enter the Lethality Assessment Program, or LAP.

The Lethality Assessment Program promotes a coordinated community response to victims that connects them with domestic violence services. Police arriving to the scene of a domestic violence incident ask victims a series of screening questions. Those questions are used to determine the lethality of the situation, and depending on the victim's answers, the responding officer(s) immediately puts the high-risk victim in touch with their local domestic violence program.

In implementing the program, we used Maryland’s nationally recognized Lethality Assessment Program as a model. Our southern neighbor’s program was developed by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence in conjunction with Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell.

It revealed that too few abuse victims received the potentially life-saving services from local domestic violence programs. Only 4% of domestic violence homicide victims had contacted a hotline, shelter, or program prior to being killed by an intimate partner.

We also knew through research, that victims who received services from a program were significantly less likely to be re-victimized than those who did not seek services. Overall, receiving domestic violence services led to a greater reduction in victims being re-assaulted than did seeking court or law enforcement protection, or moving to a new location.

**Only 4% of domestic violence homicide victims had received domestic violence services prior to being killed.**

**63%**

**High-danger victims accessed services from 2012 - 2017 through LAP**

Therefore, in 2012, the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV) implemented LAP in an effort to change the trend. We obtained grant funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) to implement this innovative and collaborative project to address the problem of why so few victims were connecting with domestic violence services that could potentially save their lives.

eSource: Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence

## The Lethality Assessment Program in PA

Reporting Period	# of Screens	# (%) High Danger	# (%) Not High Danger	# (%) Did Not Answer	# (%) Spoke with Hotline Advocate	# (%) Accessed Program Services*
Oct-Dec 2012	187	135 (72%)	49 (26%)	3 (2%)	105 (79%)	65 (62%)
Jan-Dec 2013	798	558 (70%)	229 (29%)	11 (1%)	422 (76%)	241 (57%)
Jan-Dec 2014	2841	1997 (70%)	621 (22%)	223 (8%)	1383 (69%)	930 (67%)
Jan-Dec 2015	3353	2318 (69%)	706 (21%)	329 (10%)	1528 (66%)	997 (65%)
Jan-Dec 2016	3754	2506 (67%)	908 (24%)	340 (9%)	1462 (58%)	859 (59%)
Jan-Sept 2017	3294	2247 (68%)	691 (21%)	356 (11%)	1283 (57%)	772 (60%)
<b>TOTAL to Date</b>	<b>14,227</b>	<b>9761 (69%)</b>	<b>3204 (23%)</b>	<b>1262 (9%)</b>	<b>6183 (63%)</b>	<b>3864 (63%)</b>

*\*Number of high-danger Victims who spoke to a hotline advocate and then decided to access program services. An additional 2,360 victims who screened in as not high danger, did not answer the questions or speak with a hotline advocate at the scene, accessed program services.*

The LAP pilot program began with 12 counties: Adams, Centre, Chester, Clinton, Erie, Franklin, Indiana, Lycoming, McKean, Montgomery, Tioga, and York. Those counties represented 12 domestic violence programs and 20 participating law enforcement agencies.

In 2013, the program received a boost when Allegheny County implemented LAP with five law enforcement agencies, including the second largest police force in the state, Pittsburgh Bureau of Police. With the help of the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, about 800 Pittsburgh police officers have been trained on how to use the LAP screening assessment.

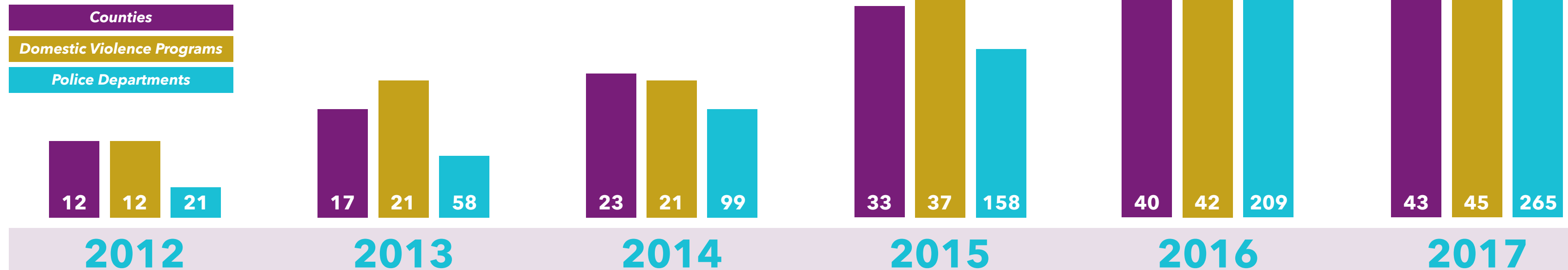
That number has grown to 256 law enforcement agencies and 45 domestic violence programs in 43 Pennsylvania counties using the LAP.

We're incredibly grateful for the law enforcement agencies that have stepped up and participated in this lifesaving program. There's no doubt that lives have

been saved as a result of connecting victims with domestic violence services.

We are proud of the progress since 2012, but we still have work to do to implement the LAP in more counties and law enforcement agencies across the state.

## LAP Implementation 2012-2017



## Technology Enhancements

When the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police implemented the LAP, they realized they had a high volume of victims being screened and decided to develop a mobile app that would enhance efficiencies in the Lethality Assessment Program. The bureau partnered with Aspirant (formerly Newton Consulting) and the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh to create the mobile app (not available to public).

The app allows officers to use the Pittsburgh Bureau's domestic violence phones to conduct a lethality assessment. The app has the same information that is on the actual lethality assessment screen and automatically informs the officer if the victim screens in as high danger. If the victim is considered high risk, the app automatically contacts the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh hotline number

and will electronically send the data from the LAP screen to the domestic violence program so the advocate has the information prior to speaking with the victim.

The Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh also partnered with Aspirant to create the RUSafe app for victims of domestic violence. The mobile app, available in Android and Apple stores, is a screening tool to educate its users to the risks faced by victims of domestic violence, such as homicides, serious injury and re-assault. Some of the LAP questions from the screening tool are included in the app along with other factors pertaining to re-assault and serious injury. The app also provides information about the local domestic violence program and the services they provide in the victim's area.

## The LAP Digital Dashboard

PCADV, in collaboration with the Pennsylvania State Data Center, Institute for State and Regional Affairs at the Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg, secured funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency to implement the Lethality Assessment Program digital dashboard system.

The interactive digital dashboard visually summarizes the data PCADV receives from the participating domestic violence programs and law enforcement agencies on a monthly basis.

Each participating county has the opportunity to view and analyze its own data and identify

the questions to which victims most commonly answer yes. For example, if the implementing county sees that a high number of victims are expressing concern over attempted strangulation, the jurisdiction may review and strengthen its protocols and training to better identify and respond to this crime.

The dashboard provides PCADV and users across the commonwealth with data to assess and address the risk factors associated with domestic violence fatalities in Pennsylvania. This data is useful at the state and local levels to enhance current policies, practices and services to better meet the specific needs of victims at high risk of being killed by their intimate partners.

**To see the LAP dashboard, visit :**

<https://isra.hbg.psu.edu/pcadvdashboards/PCADVLethalityDashboard/tabid/2645/Default.aspx>

## What's Next for Lethality Assessment?

The impact of the LAP is both quantitative and qualitative. Not only does the LAP educate victims and law enforcement administering the LAP screens, it also empowers victims to take positive steps for themselves and their children toward ending the abuse.

In addition, the LAP has substantially improved the collaboration between services provided by law enforcement and domestic violence programs. But we're not done yet. Several initiatives and goals are on the horizon, including:

- Implementing the LAP in more rural counties. This goal will require the Pennsylvania State Police to adopt the LAP. Once the program is available throughout the state, we can fully ascertain the impact that LAP has on reducing intimate partner homicides.
- Examining the use of the LAP on a web-based platform where law enforcement can complete the screen electronically and send the screen to their partner domestic violence program and PCADV from their vehicles or offices. This would eliminate the use of paper forms and provide the domestic violence programs with quicker access to the screens and reduce reporting requirements.



PCADV EXPANDS LETHALITY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM TO

# COLLEGE CAMPUSES AND UNIVERSITIES

Dating violence on college campuses and universities is a growing problem.

**Women ages 20 to 24 are most at risk of becoming victims.**

Statistics show that one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime, and women between the ages of 20 and 24 are most at risk. In fact, 57% of college students who report being in an abusive relationship said it happened while they were in college.

For this reason, PCADV is working diligently to expand its Lethality Assessment Program to Pennsylvania colleges and universities as part of our effort to end domestic and dating violence among young adults.

Currently, 17 colleges and universities in 11 counties across the state are partnering with domestic violence programs in using the LAP. The first was Indiana University of Pennsylvania, which implemented the program in 2012, with the help of the Alice Paul House.

Among college students who were surveyed, 70% were not aware at the time they were in an abusive relationship.

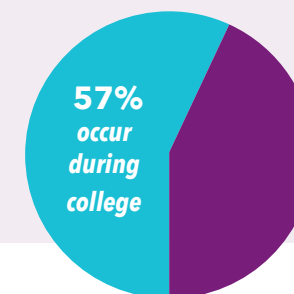
The program provides an opportunity to educate dating violence victims about behaviors in unhealthy relationships. It also provides the opportunity to show dating violence victims how some of those unhealthy behaviors can be lethal, even if they don't initially involve physical abuse.

## Dating Violence On College Campuses

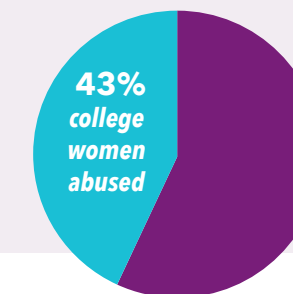
In PA, people aged 17 to 24 killed by a current or former intimate partner from 2006-2016



57% of college students who report having been in an abusive dating relationship said it occurred in college.



43% of dating college women report experiencing some violence and abusive dating behaviors; including physical, sexual, technology, verbal or controlling abuse.



**70% of college students surveyed were not aware at the time they were in an abusive relationship.**

In addition to implementing the LAP, our coalition has engaged Title IX coordinators to increase awareness of college dating violence. Some of these initiatives include:

- Provided dating violence posters and other awareness materials to increase student awareness.
- Created a Relationship Violence Reference Guide for Resident Advisors.
- Conducted focus groups with Title IX coordinators, domestic violence program staff and university law enforcement to discuss LAP implementation and best practices.
- Conducted focus groups with college students to measure the impact of awareness materials.
- Produced a Student Safety Guide to assist students in planning for safety on campus.
- Coordinate yearly site visits that bring together Title IX coordinators, domestic violence program staff, and campus law enforcement to explore LAP successes and challenges and expanded coordinated community response.

### A LAP SUCCESS STORY

In February, police responded to a domestic violence call and completed the LAP screen but the victim did not screen in as high danger. In March, police responded to the same house for a domestic violence call and completed the LAP screen. The victim now screened in as high danger and was immediately connected with a hotline advocate. When the victim went to the domestic violence program for services, she spoke about the LAP process and how it made her feel not only supported by police officers and advocates, but it helped her to realize that the situation she was in was dangerous and that she deserved a much better life.

# LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ADVOCATES

## APPLAUD LETHALITY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Law enforcement has told us how easy and useful the Lethality Assessment Program is in connecting victims with domestic violence services.

Domestic violence advocates say the program has strengthened their relationship with local law enforcement.

We gathered this positive feedback from annual LAP roundtables we hosted from 2013 to 2015 with police and advocates in counties which have implemented the LAP.

During the roundtable discussions, participants remarked on how the LAP fostered mutual respect for both law

enforcement and domestic violence program roles. Advocates expressed appreciation for how police bolstered the role of the domestic violence program to the victim which, in turn, increased the likelihood that high-risk victims would speak with an advocate and seek services from the domestic violence program.

PCADV also provided a training component during the roundtable events. The training topics included domestic violence in the LGBTQ community, power and control tactics used by abusers at the scene, how trauma impacts adult victims and children, strangulation, and anoxic brain injury.

In the past two years, PCADV has recognized that if an abuser is violently jealous or if the victim has been strangled or stalked, that these can be traumatic events for the victims. For a victim who has experienced trauma, answering the LAP screening questions could create a traumatic reaction.

For law enforcement responding to an incident, a victim's level of trauma can ultimately affect the interview process and investigation. Domestic violence advocates who work with victims who have experienced trauma know that trauma may impact their interactions with victims such as speaking with a victim on a hotline call or when they seek services.

### A LAP SUCCESS STORY

A victim was moving out of the home that she shared with the abuser. The victim had planned to leave the abuser and had not realized that risk increased around separation. An incident occurred and the victim's mother, who was there to help the victim move out of the home, called the police. The victim, who was screened, had not realized the danger of the escalating behavior (which had included strangulation) until contact with the police and victim services. Since the victim had contact with victim's services in the immediate aftermath of the incident, she followed through with safety planning, when in the past she would have declined services. Working with an advocate, she filed for a PFA as part of her safety plan. The PFA gave her a window to complete her move out of state.

Nationally known criminal justice expert David Markel provided a training at a half-day roundtable in 2016 on the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview. Participants were so impressed that we provided a full-day training on the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview in April 2017.

These LAP roundtables were incredibly beneficial in providing a continuous learning experience detailing both the challenges and successes in counties that have implemented the LAP.

## Remarks from roundtable participants regarding the benefits of the lethality assessment program:

***"The Lethality Assessment Program has definitely been a success," said Pittsburgh Police Detective Tamara Hawthorne.***

***"It is getting more victims of domestic violence in contact with victim services. It definitely has reduced the incidents. I'm seeing it firsthand."***

***"Adds structure to challenging situations. Screen is easy and takes law enforcement 5-10 minutes more at the scene."***

***"This is the best proactive tool for law enforcement in combating domestic violence in the last 25 years."***

***"STOP teams supportive of process - members able to recognize a high danger situation and are able to connect victims with services."***

***"Law enforcement seeing a decrease in calls to the same residence."***



## ADVOCATES AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

# LAP CAN SAVE LIVES

Every day in Pennsylvania, police officers arrive at the scene of domestic violence situations. These are among the most dangerous calls law enforcement undertakes, and far too often, the end result is tragic.

Officers have the opportunity at the scene to encourage victims to seek life-saving services at local domestic violence programs. Research shows some do. However, most do not.

***Eleven questions can be the difference between life and death in a domestic violence situation.***

The difference between life and death in a domestic violence situation can be 11 questions. Eleven questions that assess how likely it is a victim will be killed by an abusive partner. Eleven questions and 11 answers that can help get a victim the services they need before it's too late.

"Often in police work we deal with the result and not always the answer," said Coatesville Police Sgt. Rodger Ollis. His department has been using the LAP for five years. "I see Lethality Assessment as the answer."

It's a questionnaire that officers can use at the scene of a domestic incident that gauges the lethality of the situation. From there, we can connect victims with advocates to get them help quickly - which is remarkable and beneficial."

"LAP can definitely save lives."

Forty-three of the 67 Pennsylvania counties have implemented the LAP and there are 265 police departments using it.

Between 2008 and 2013, Maryland, which pioneered the program, saw a 32% drop in domestic violence-related deaths.

## LAP SUCCESS STORIES

The abuser had been arrested several times for assaulting the victim. The police department had gone through the Lethality Assessment Program training and after the last arrest an officer administered a screen, described to the victim how dangerous her situation was, and immediately connected her with the domestic violence program hotline. The advocate encouraged the victim to come into the safe house. The officer provided transportation for the victim to the safe house. The advocate met the victim there where the two safety planned, and the advocate provided the victim instructions on how to file a Temporary PFA the following day. The advocate also provided the victim with bus passes in order to get to the County Courthouse. The following day the victim received her PFA. In the following weeks, the victim continued to meet with a domestic violence counselor to address long-term safety planning. The victim decided the safest course of action would be to relocate out of the county. The victim accessed the domestic violence program's relocation funds in order to move quickly and successfully. She was referred to DV services in her new hometown for continued counseling.

A mother of two girls was badly beaten by her boyfriend and thrown out of her home without her children. When she called the police, a LAP screen was done and the victim screened in as high-danger. The police officer called the domestic violence program hotline and the victim spoke with an advocate. The victim sought services and obtained a PFA order and regained majority custody of her children.

While this effect cannot be directly attributed to the LAP, increasing participation in the LAP contributed.

The Domestic Violence Center of Chester County was one of the first 12 organizations to participate in the LAP in 2012. Since then, the organization has trained 42 police departments in Chester County on how to implement the program, center CEO Dolly Wideman-Scott said.

“What we all appreciate about it is that it’s an evidence-based program, and it really helps victims and survivors access our services quickly,” she said. “It’s been an outstanding program.”

Dolly said some victims have told center staff that they were surprised police took the time to ask the victim questions and call the domestic violence center. Many reported it wasn’t the first incident of domestic violence.

“It’s made a tremendous difference in victims’ lives,” she said. “They were able to learn about the issue and understand that they are in a domestic violence situation and could be badly injured or killed the next time.”

“In our county, it’s so rural that some victims are just not aware of us and often times do not have transportation,” said

### A LAP SUCCESS STORY

An abuse victim arrived at the hospital. He was strangled, needed stitches above his eye, and his wrist was fractured. After being treated, an officer spoke with the victim and completed an LAP screen, which revealed the victim was in danger. Following the screen, the victim discussed the abuse. “He said he wouldn’t do this again. Why does he keep doing this to me?” It was apparent that the violence was escalating. The next day the victim filed for a Protection From Abuse (PFA) order. The victim also attended a support group at a local domestic violence program and has continued to attend group meetings since the abuse happened. “Even though I have worked in victim services for almost 20 years, I still learn more and more. Your race, gender, or sexual orientation does not matter – the story may be different but the victimization is the same. I am thankful for the Lethality Assessment Program, and our wonderful relationships with police,” said a domestic violence prevention advocate.

Michele Minor-Wolf, Executive Director of Victims Intervention Program. “Where LAP is helpful is when police are at the scene, the officers are familiar with us and can help victims get the services they need.”

York Area Regional Police Sgt. Ken Schollenberger said being able to talk to a victim and explain the importance of connecting with services is very impactful for them and the police officers involved.

**“Just the collaboration with the Pittsburgh Police Department has improved our relationship. I think it’s the best it’s ever been.”**

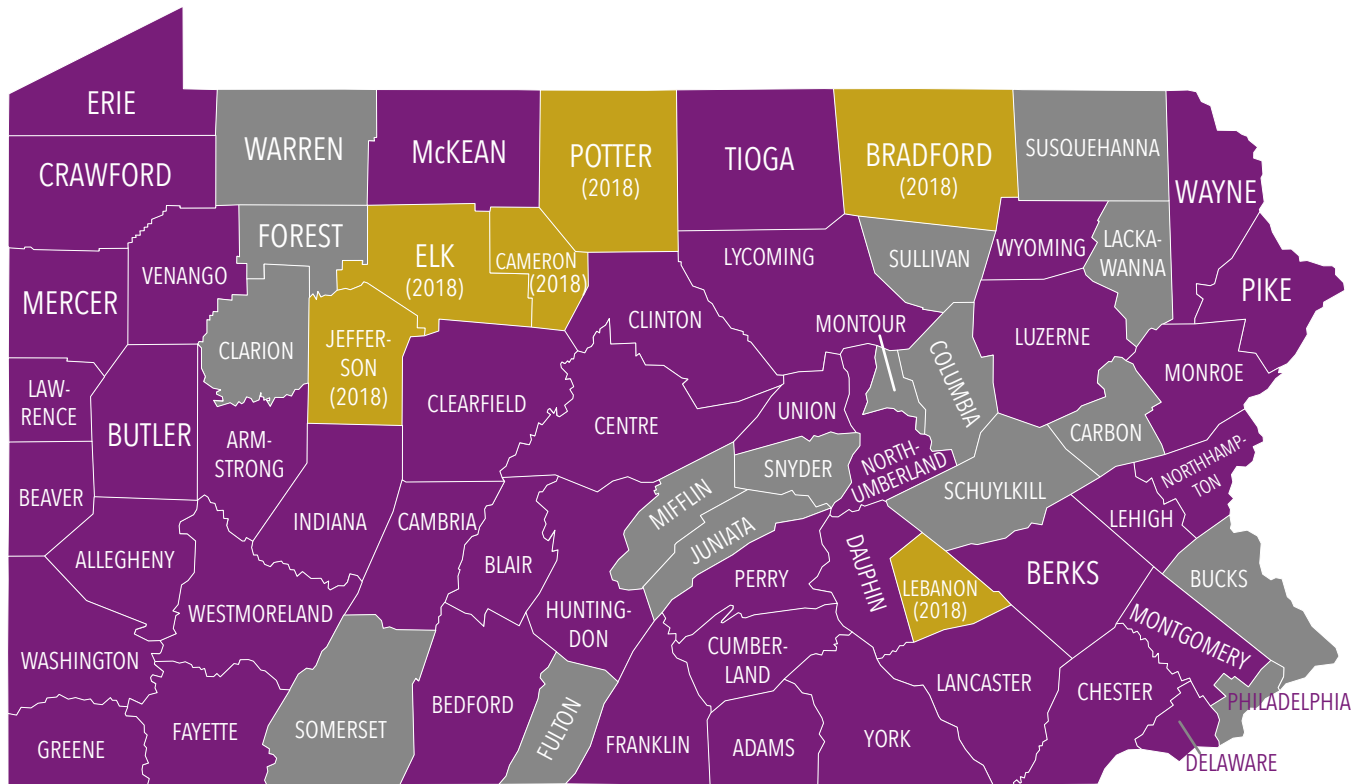
**Joyce McAneny,  
The Women’s Center  
& Shelter of  
Greater Pittsburgh**

“As law enforcement officers, we’re trained to interview people based on successful cases and successful prosecution,” he said. “And a lot of times if a police officer is at the scene that’s believed to be domestic and we know we’re going to be back, we now have the research and backing to know within a certain degree that this person is in danger of being killed.”

The Lethality Assessment Program also bolsters the relationship between law enforcement and local domestic violence programs, said Joyce McAneny, legal advocacy manager for the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh.

“Law enforcement is now more aware of our services,” Joyce said. “They are also finding that the majority of victims have not had contact with the Women’s Center or any domestic violence center in Allegheny County.”

“Just the collaboration with the Pittsburgh Police Department has improved our relationship,” Joyce said. “I think it’s the best it’s ever been.”



**Purple: Using LAP      Yellow: Implementing in 2018      Gray: Not Using LAP**

Currently **43 counties** and **265 police departments** have implemented LAP.

This map shows the counties that are currently utilizing LAP.

### About PCADV

Founded in 1976, the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence is the nation's first Statewide domestic violence coalition. Each year, through a network of 60 community-based programs in all 67 counties, it provides free and confidential services to nearly 90,000 victims of domestic violence and their children. **For more information visit, [pcadv.org](http://pcadv.org).**



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