

Extra Help for Victims in South Yorkshire...

Providing the best possible support and protection for victims and potential victims of violence – in particular, domestic violence – is a high priority for South Yorkshire Police. To help achieve this, they have considered and used many technologies, including house alarms and specially issued mobile telephones. However, house alarms are of no value to victims when they are outside their homes, while mobile phones are often difficult for at-risk individuals to use in an emergency situation and they provide no instantly accessible information about the individual's whereabouts.

For these reasons, the South Yorkshire Police Domestic Abuse staff developed a close interest in dedicated portable personal safety devices, specifically those provided by Skyguard. These offer much greater versatility than alternatives, since they can operate in almost any location, with the latest devices incorporating GPS technology allowing them to instantly and accurately report the user's location when an alarm is triggered.

The devices clearly offer many benefits, and South Yorkshire Police believed it was worth the investment to increase the confidence and safety of victims of violence. To help fund the devices, Anita McKenzie, South Yorkshire Police Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator, adopted a multi-agency approach.

"We used a range of funding sources to fund the devices including the Regional Government Offices, who provided us with money from its Interpersonal Safety Fund. Other sources included Crime Reduction Partnerships and local Domestic Abuse Co-ordinators funding."

In addition to the excellent benefits for victims of domestic abuse, Anita Mckenzie said: "There are savings for the police as these devices often lead to rapid arrests, which have a sobering effect on many attackers and reduce the rate of repeat offending. Additionally, most at-risk individuals can be protected in their own community, thereby eliminating the cost of moving them to safe houses. But other agencies benefit too. For example, fewer assaults mean less spending on accident and emergency services by the National Health Service. Explaining these wider benefits helps to make a much stronger case for providing personal protection devices."

South Yorkshire Police is currently operating almost 50 personal safety devices, all of which have been supplied by Skyguard. In the main, these are issued to individuals who are, after a detailed risk assessment, judged to be at high risk of future violence. A small number of units have however, been issued to the

Independent Domestic Violence Advocates who, as part of their work, regularly visit high risk victims of violence in their homes. The advocates do not have the benefit of direct access to the police radio communication system.

The units are simple to use and effective in operation. When the user triggers an alarm, an alert signal is instantly passed to the Skyguard Incident Management Centre (IMC), along with the GPS coordinates of the device. Specially trained operatives at the centre then pass the details to the police, using pre-arranged codes and terminology to ensure rapid, accurate and unambiguous communication. The data relayed is sufficiently detailed to allow officers responding to the incident to call up background information and start making appropriate preparations before they arrive at the scene.

In addition, once the device has been triggered, an audio connection to the IMC is established, allowing any conversation or noises relating to the incident to be recorded for potential later use as evidence.

An example of the beneficial effects of the devices is provided by a recent case in Rotherham involving an offender who had made multiple and regular attacks on a female. After she had been issued with a Skyguard unit, she used it to call for help when she was threatened with yet another attack. As a result of the fast police response, the attacker was arrested and subsequently convicted of harassment. He was released on bail, but with very tight conditions that have proved sufficient to prevent further attacks.

In another case, an offender visited the home of an at-risk female who had just been issued with a Skyguard unit, and started banging on windows and doors in an attempt to force entry. Once again the police attended very quickly, and the offender was arrested in a nearby garden. The most important benefit in this instance was the effect it had on the victim – because of the rapid and effective police response, her confidence was boosted and she started to feel that, for the first time in some considerable period, she was safe in her own home.

“In the end, this is a demonstration of the most important benefit by far of the Skyguard personal safety devices said Anita McKenzie, “in that they help to give these individuals their lives back. To restore normality for these people is our primary goal and the devices are proving to be a valuable ingredient in the mix of measures that are needed to do this.”