

West Midlands Police Restore Victim Confidence with Skyguard...

Restoring as much normality as possible to the lives of people who are at risk of violence, and reducing the number of assaults they suffer, are two of the principal objectives of the officers working in the West Midlands Police Domestic Abuse Department (WMPDAD). And, over the last nine months, they have found that one of the most effective and dependable ways of achieving these objectives is to provide vulnerable individuals with Skyguard personal safety devices.

Among the key features of these compact and easy to use devices are automatic capture of GPS data, which allows the user to be readily tracked and located at all times, and discreet operation, which, in a threat situation, enables the user to trigger an alert without their assailant realising that an alarm has been raised.

As part of their on-going efforts to find ways of providing better protection for people at risk, officers from the WMPDAD carried out an initial assessment of the Skyguard devices early in 2009. Their assessment also covered the support services provided by Skyguard, which have been carefully planned and implemented to combine the fastest possible response to alerts with comprehensive capture of incident-related data and audio that may subsequently be of use to the police.

“On the basis of our assessment, we concluded that the Skyguard devices had excellent potential for helping us in our work,” said Kelly Eaves, of the WMPDAD at West Midlands Police. “So we decided to proceed with field trials. To carry these out, we purchased ten of the units and we also signed a two-year contract with Skyguard for incident management and technical support services.”

The WMPDAD team supplies the devices to those persons it considers to be most at risk of a violent attack. The devices are usually provided on a short-term basis – typically for a few weeks – to allow time, for example, for the person who is threatening violence to be dealt with by the courts, or for the potential victim to be relocated. So that the results of the field trials can be fully evaluated, a detailed questionnaire is completed every time one of the devices is returned by a user.

These questionnaires include the user’s comments about the effectiveness and usefulness of the units, and responses to date have proved both interesting and informative, as a selection of real examples shows.

Replying to a question about whether the Skyguard units helped her to feel safe, one user said, "Yes, very safe, especially with the full-on response I got when I activated it." Another said, "The Skyguard device is a very good idea because you know you are safe and that if anything does happen, everything is being recorded for evidence", while a third user said "I feel a lot safer with the unit, day and night. It gives me the confidence to walk down the road, and I sleep a lot better."

Feelings of confidence and security are themes that recur in almost all of the questionnaires, with other comments including "I feel I can leave the house more", "It made me feel the safest I have in years" and "It is invaluable for a feeling of safety and well being."

Boosting the confidence of users and helping them to lead near normal lives are, however, not the only achievements of the Skyguard units during their trials with West Midlands Police – they have also led to at least one arrest and successful conviction.

The incident concerns a female victim who had previously suffered violence. Her attacker had been apprehended and was given conditional bail, with one of the principal conditions being that he did not approach the address where the victim was living. Within 24 hours of being granted bail, however, the attacker not only visited this address, but also attempted to break in.

When she realised what was happening, the victim activated her Skyguard device. The Skyguard response team assessed the situation and immediately passed details of the alert to West Midlands Police, who reached the scene of the incident within five minutes of the device being activated. The attacker was arrested, held in custody, and subsequently convicted not only of the original attack, but also for breaching his bail conditions.

"This example shows that user confidence in the Skyguard devices is well founded," said Kelly Eaves, "and also that the devices are an invaluable resource for us in tackling the problem of domestic abuse. They have proved very reliable – they are very robust and the users like them so much that they look after them carefully – and we've only had one false activation in all the time we've been using them, which was sorted out very quickly."

"The devices are, without a doubt, helping us to reduce the number of assaults, not least because attackers are starting to realise that their victims now have a very fast and efficient way of summoning help. Overall, we're very pleased with the performance and reliability of the Skyguard units and with the support provided by the company, and we hope that we'll soon be able to roll out the units on an even wider scale."