



Violence Free Minnesota Statement on Burnsville Police and EMT Domestic Violence Homicides

Violence Free Minnesota, the statewide coalition to end relationship abuse, joins our community in mourning the firefighter-paramedic and two police officers killed on February 18, 2024 in Burnsville while responding to a domestic violence call. We grieve for their loved ones and acknowledge the enormous impact of their deaths. Adam Finseth, Paul Elmstrand, and Matthew Ruge will be included in our *2024 Intimate Partner Homicide Report* as the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th confirmed victims of intimate partner homicide in Minnesota in 2024.

As the only agency in Minnesota to capture the full scope of intimate partner homicide in our state since 1989, we seek to draw attention to the broader context of this tragedy, which requires a gendered analysis of violence overlooked by the media. The suspect in this shooting felt entitled to hold his female partner and children hostage for hours, causing unfathomable trauma to his family whose experiences and the voices of domestic violence experts have largely been omitted from reporting. **The lives of a woman and seven children are forever changed. Several children witnessed the shooting, and some witnessed the suspect end his life. These are the stories that are not being told.**

Adam Finseth, Paul Elmstrand, and Matthew Ruge were not killed in a targeted police attack; they were killed because a man barricading his family felt threatened by attempts to undermine his power and control over them. Furthermore, he was legally prohibited from possessing a firearm, yet was found with several. Nearly every year in Minnesota and nationwide, men who kill their female partners overwhelmingly do so by firearm. He allegedly had a history of domestic violence against multiple previous female partners, including violence so severe one woman stated she believed he would eventually kill her, and yet a court dismissed her allegations. Despite his history of violence, when he and his ex-girlfriend went to court over custody, the judge ordered shared custody and ordered their three children to stay with him two-thirds of the time. These children were three of the seven children he held hostage on February 18.

We must emphasize that this shooting was preventable. Misogyny and firearms together are deadly. Not believing women is deadly. Not investing in Domestic Abuse Transformation Programming and prevention of abuse is deadly. **Any coverage of or conversation about this shooting that neglects to place it within a context of gender-based violence, and any outrage at this tragedy that does not include outrage at its context, does victim/survivors, particularly women, an immense disservice.**

For over 30 years, Violence Free Minnesota has documented intimate partner homicides in our annual *Homicide Report: Relationship Abuse in Minnesota*. At least 830 victims, the vast majority women, have been killed due to relationship abuse in our state since 1989. Of the 261 people killed since 2014, forty-six were bystanders/intervenors. Of those forty-six bystanders/intervenors, only four were police, including the two officers killed in Burnsville. We do not aim to minimize these officers' deaths, but to expand public narratives of domestic violence in Minnesota, who it most impacts, and who it most endangers. **The Burnsville shooting comes on the heels of at least 39 lives lost due to relationship abuse in 2023, the highest number we have recorded since 1989. Many of these victims will never receive a public outpouring of recognition.**

There is a profound tiredness in recognizing that every year domestic violence victims in our state are murdered brutally and with little public outcry, and that we continue to call for the same policy recommendations to prevent these deaths year after year. **Many of the same elected officials and system partners who have been vocal about this shooting will not read our *Homicide Reports*, will not attend our annual memorials, will not invest in advocacy services, and will not prioritize the safety of survivors** when survivors tell them what they need to be safe. They will not have conversations about domestic violence outside of this shooting, even as advocates raise awareness of an increase in the severity of violence without adequate funding in return. They will voice the names of these three victims, but not the names of any women from the past 30 years. **Relationship abuse exists 365 days a year and deserves proportionate recognition.**

In our *30-Year Retrospective Report*, we called attention to the community impact of domestic violence as a public health issue with extensive ripple effects. Our schools, hospitals, workplaces, places of worship, and neighborhoods are all impacted in some form. The families of the first responders and the families of the women and children are all affected. The circle of impact caused by domestic violence touches everyone. It is a through-line across all our communities.

We also call attention to the incredible importance of community-based advocates, who work tirelessly 24/7, 365 days a year to provide lifesaving support to victim/survivors, even after systems professionals cease to be involved and even as their work receives a fraction of the funding and recognition of law enforcement. As experts on domestic violence, their prevention and intervention work is critical, yet their expertise is often left unconsidered. The gravity of investing in alternative responses to the criminal legal system cannot be understated, and has remained a call to action for decades now, particularly from Black and Indigenous leaders in our movement. When community-based advocacy is adequately funded and resourced, survivor and community safety increase and domestic violence calls to police decrease.

As we mourn the losses of Adam Finseth, Paul Elmstrand, and Matthew Ruge, we also call on our community—including our elected officials and reporters—to ensure that the context of their homicides does not go unspoken and that the female survivors and children be granted the care and consideration they deserve. **Achieving a violence free Minnesota demands that we explicitly name domestic violence when and where it occurs, and that it remains a matter of community action before, during, and after tragedies like these—not just when first responders are killed in their attempts to assist.**

If you are experiencing abuse, please contact DayOne at 866-223-1111 to connect with services. A list of Domestic Abuse Transformation Programs that serve Minnesotans using harm in their relationships can be found at vfmn.org/find-a-datp-program.

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