

COOK COUNTY COMMISSION ON WOMEN’S ISSUES
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND COVID-19 PUBLIC HEARING
RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Cook County Commission on Women’s Issues submits the following five recommendations to protect women and girls in Cook County:

1) Enable and encourage accessible ongoing remote access to court proceedings for gender-based violence survivors including emergency protective orders, status court dates and routine appearances.

- As a result of court closings due to Covid-19, alternative remote procedures were established. While initially instituted to address emergency issues such as Orders of Protection, soon most court proceedings occurred over videoconferencing.¹
- Remote filings and appearances in emergency protective order cases have increased accessibility and have allowed for safer participation by survivors including those who are elderly, disabled, immune-compromised, or receiving medical treatment for injuries sustained during an abusive incident.
- The process to obtain an Order of Protection should prioritize the safety and accessibility needs of survivors.
 - Previously, survivors have had to appear in a specific place, at a specific time, with notice given to the person who has caused them harm. This has caused an increase in harm to survivors who have to experience the trauma of coming face to face with the person who has harmed them in court. This also considerably increases the risk of survivors being harassed or harmed outside of the courthouse, stalked and/or followed to locations where they have found safe shelter away from their abuser.
 - Survivors often need to arrange for childcare, transportation, or take unpaid time off work to seek this important remedy. Ongoing remote access will alleviate this burden on survivors and their families.

¹ Cook Co. Cir. Ct. G.A.O. No. 2020-01

2) Increase funding for Perpetrator Services including supervised visitation and safe exchange sites in suburban Cook County.

- Supervised visitation and safe exchange sites are a crucial way to ensure safe visitation or exchanges occur between children and a parent who has caused harm. They provide a safe way for children who might otherwise not be able to visit with a parent to continue to safely have a relationship with that parent. They also provide safety, services and resources for survivor parents.
- Currently, there are no free supervised visitation centers exist in suburban Cook County. There are only three free supervised visitation and safe exchange centers in Chicago.
- These sites are overburdened, and there is often a wait before visits can begin. Additional funding is needed to expand services. The average wait time for a family is based on the capacity of each of the free centers which typically remain overbooked. Currently it takes several weeks for families to be places.

3) Update Cook County employment policies to ensure compliance with the Victims' Economic Safety and Security Act (VESSA) and sexual harassment laws; suggest changes where necessary.

- Cook County can assist survivors of gender-based violence by ensuring that its own employment policies and procedures are up to date and compliant with the Victims' Economic Safety and Security Act as well as the recent changes that have been made to sexual harassment statutes.
- Review current Cook County VESSA and sexual harassment policies and update them to correspond with current law. In particular, update the VESSA policies to comply with recent statutory changes.
- To ensure future compliance, ensure that the above policies are reviewed on an annual basis.

4) Ensure that women housed at Cook County Jails are provided with access to in person contact visitation with their families.

- According to the Women’s Justice Institute over 90% of the women in prisons are survivors of gender-based violence and other forms of abuse. 80% of women in prison are mothers, and the majority are parents of young children.² Visitation policies at the Cook County jail impact survivors and their children. The ability to see, speak with, and touch their children are crucial to maintaining a parent’s relationship.
- Several different forms of visitation have been used at the jail in the past, including video calls and visits through a see-through barrier. During Covid-19, visits that would normally have occurred indoors through a see-through barrier have occurred outside, without a barrier.
- The Cook County Jail should continue this change, and further modify visitation provisions so that all mothers who are temporarily housed at the jail for longer than fourteen (14 days) can have in person contact visits with their children in line with public health mandates or unless a court orders otherwise.
- In order to prioritize the best interests of children whose parents are housed in the Cook County Jail, visitation policies should be in accordance with the Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated as supported by the United Nations.³

5) Adopt Start by Believing Day

- *Start by Believing Day* was created by End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI), to raise awareness about sexual assault. The effort focuses on changing the reaction and disbelief that survivors often face when they disclose an assault, with the goal of supporting survivors and changing their outcomes.¹
- Start by Believing Day, is the first Wednesday of every April. This provides an opportunity for communities across the country, and around the world, to unify with a single voice for those who have been victims of sexual violence.
- By passing this resolution, Cook County would join 580 municipalities and states to raise awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) of women and girls’ sexual assaults in the workplace, at schools and colleges and at home.

² “Redefine the Narrative”, Women’s Justice Institute (WJI) April 2021 <https://redefine.womensjusticeinstitute.org/>

³ [Children of Incarcerated Parents’ Bill of Rights](http://www.osborneny.org/services/strengthening-communities/new-york-initiative-for-children-of-incarcerated-parents/bill-of-rights/), <http://www.osborneny.org/services/strengthening-communities/new-york-initiative-for-children-of-incarcerated-parents/bill-of-rights/>
