

March 10, 2016

Wicked Local Fall River

<http://fall-river.wickedlocal.com/article/20160310/OPINION/160318835>

Our View: Change Mass. law hiding domestic violence arrest records



Courtesy Bristol County District Attorney's office From left to right: Tamara Dzialo from the domestic violence unit, DA Thomas Quinn and Courtney Cahill, chief of the domestic violence unit.

- **By Editorial Board**

Posted Mar. 10, 2016 at 3:51 PM

For generations, a culture of secrecy and control was one of the issues that kept domestic violence victims from seeking help and shielded batterers from being held accountable for their actions. Although great strides have been

made in recent years to shine a light on these crimes, a law intended to protect the privacy of victims may also be shielding their abusers from accountability and enabling them to continue the cycle of abuse.

Bristol County District Attorney Tom Quinn held a press conference on Wednesday to highlight his office's participation in the Massachusetts White Ribbon Day Campaign, which aims to raise public awareness of domestic violence issues. In doing so, Quinn shed a light on the particular problem of repeat domestic violence offenders and touted his office's efforts to monitor and prosecute these abusers and keep them behind bars.

According to Quinn, the DA's office monitors 156 men considered high-risk offenders. Shockingly, these offenders have victimized 569 victims. They have 869 protective orders out against them and they've been criminally charged 8,414 times. These are clearly very dangerous people who ought to be behind bars.

In many instances, the cases Quinn highlighted on Wednesday — no matter how egregious — may not have been made public before because they were hidden from public consumption by local police. That's because the Massachusetts domestic violence law enacted in August 2014 prohibits police departments from releasing any information about domestic violence arrests or incidents, unless the victim dies.

Despite the strong objections of advocates of the free press over that provision, it was signed into law by then-Gov. Deval Patrick. As a result, the names of people arrested and charged with domestic violence are kept out of the daily arrest logs reviewed by the press.

While the well-intentioned provision is meant to protect victims by shielding their identity, since in many cases they share the address of their abuser, it also shields the perpetrators from public scrutiny and prevents people from knowing their dangerous, violent tendencies — now and in the future.

While it is understandable that a concern over domestic violence incidents becoming public knowledge could serve as a deterrent for victims in reporting crimes to police, the fact is the information is still available in court records, which can be released after an arraignment. Quinn said on Wednesday he would support changing the law to allow for the public disclosure of such information. "This might have been well intended, but it's not necessary," he said.

Other law enforcement officials ought to follow Quinn's lead in calling for this change. State legislators should introduce and support legislation allowing for this misguided provision's repeal. Society cannot shine a light on domestic violence if the laws intended to prosecute and penalize domestic abusers also work to keep their crimes hidden.