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North Charleston awarded national grant money to battle domestic violence homicides

Natalie Caula

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Provided Leslie McCravy was killed in 2007 by a man she had been dating off and on for about eight years. He shot her and turned the gun on himself.

After years of topping national rankings of domestic violence homicides, South Carolina is getting some help from the federal government in the fight to stop the bloodshed.

By the numbers

North Charleston domestic-related homicides:

2011 1

2012 1

Criminal domestic violence victims:

2011 958

2012 910

A major milestone in that fight was marked Wednesday when Vice President Joe Biden announced that North Charleston is among 12 cities to receive a grant to battle those killings. The grant, estimated to be about \$200,000, will help a group of Lowcountry agencies combat the problem in the state's third largest city.



S.C. numbers

In 2011, 52 people were murdered by a household member in South Carolina; 75 percent of them were women.

In 2006, Charleston County had the second highest number of criminal domestic violence victims in South Carolina.

Source: S.C. Attorney General's Office



Leslie McCravy was killed in 2007 by a man she had been dating off and on for about eight years.

Biden and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced the award, which is part of a \$2.3 million effort by the U.S. Justice Department to curb domestic violence homicides across the nation.

"We have to do everything in our power, every single thing in our power to keep these tragedies from occurring," Biden said during a press conference in Maryland. "We can do more to prevent these tragedies from happening." The city of North Charleston, Medical University of South Carolina's National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center and My Sister's House will participate in the local program. North Charleston's grants administrator, Shannon Praete, said the exact amount of the grant and the project's start date are still unclear. They're still waiting for the award letter.

The effort, dubbed the Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Initiative, helps local jurisdictions reduce domestic violence killings by identifying potential victims and monitoring high-risk offenders. It's modeled after programs in Massachusetts and Maryland, where groups have reduced those types of murders, federal officials said.

The program would allow for further research and analysis into domestic violence cases, looking at past behaviors by those involved in the relationships. By identifying potential red flags, social services within the community could intervene before the relationship ends in bloodshed, according to North Charleston Deputy Police Chief Scott Deckard.

But before the city can start solving the dilemma, it needs to finish identifying where the root of the problem lies.

The grant is for one year. During that time, the city needs to perform a thorough assessment of the community and see where it can improve its system, whether through better reporting of crimes, making changes to the court process or holding offenders more accountable, according to Alyssa Rheingold, director of clinical operations for MUSC's crime victims center.

Once the city submits that information, it will wait and hope it is provided with grant funding for two more years to execute the program in North Charleston and finally curb the sad statistic. "Yes, I believe it can work," Rheingold said.

But first, culture and attitudes about dealing with domestic violence need to be adjusted in the state, according to Rheingold. Last year, the state was ranked second nationally for the number of women murdered by men by the Violence Policy Center, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. In North Charleston, electronic signs along Rivers Avenue urge people to report acts of domestic violence. Larry McCravy and his wife, Debbie, are strong believers in making a culture change. The Charleston couple lost their only child, Leslie McCravy, to domestic violence in 2007. Police reports indicate McCravy was shot and killed by her boyfriend, who then turned the gun on himself and also died.

"It's something you never get over," Larry McCravy said. "You do the best you can."

The day before McCravy and Deshawn Wright were found dead inside a Byrnes Downs home, Wright had pointed a gun at McCravy and threatened her, according to a friend of hers.

"We didn't know anything about it," Larry McCravy said. "She kept that from us."

The McCravys have been working with others to shed light on the domestic violence problem plaguing South Carolina. If parents are talking to their kids about sex and drugs, why not too about domestic violence, McCravy proposes.

"Domestic violence should be one of 'the talks.' We certainly didn't talk about it. We didn't have any experience with domestic violence," he said.

Larry McCravy said he's thrilled the state is getting help to tackle the problem of domestic violence head-on.

Reach Natalie Caula at 937-5594 or [Twitter.com/ncaula](https://twitter.com/ncaula).