

PARTNERS IN PROTECTION



NSA and Lyft are fine-tuning a grant program that has helped transport hundreds of domestic violence victims to safety

By Ed Finkel

"Sara" was in a desperate situation. A perpetrator had forced his way into her home despite a no-contact order that resulted from several reports filed previously with the Orange County (Florida) Sheriff's Office. He attacked Sara, choking her, before kicking her and their four small children out of the home while repeatedly threatening to kill himself.

Thanks to a partnership between the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) and ride-share company Lyft, Sara immediately obtained multiple basic needs for herself, her children, and their pets. She filed for an injunction following up on her criminal case. She was then able to meet with various victims' advocates and programs to get relocation assistance and start to heal as a survivor of domestic abuse.

Through the partnership, Lyft has been providing rideshare credits to several sheriff's offices and affiliated crime victim services agencies since last year to support domestic violence victims who need safe, discreet rides to everything from court hearings to doctor's appointments—and rides to get away from dangerous situations.

Lyft is continuing the grant program in four counties in 2021. Sheriff's offices, social service agencies, and victims in Orange County; Oakland County, Michigan; Fayette County, Kentucky; and Niagara County, New York will be able to access funding.

"Access to transportation is our superpower," says Ed Hutchison, policy partnerships manager and law enforcement liaison at Lyft, and former director of Traffic, Triad, and Officer Safety for NSA. "We thought there must be a way to provide that transportation to these individuals in a safe way."

RIDES HELP KEEP VICTIMS OUT OF DANGER

Lyft and NSA jointly conceived of the partnership based on data from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: 4.8 million intimate partner assaults and rapes occur annually; less than 20% of victims seek medical treatment; and 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men experience physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetimes. In addition, the Institute of Women's Policy Research has found that 73% of respondents stayed with or returned to an abusive partner for economic reasons, including the lack of a car.

NSA's Domestic Violence & Crime Victim Services Committee approved the Lyft partnership based on the idea that it should be



The Orange County (Florida) Sheriff's Office supplied more than 170 Lyft rides to domestic violence victims through September 2020.

overseen by law enforcement and local domestic violence shelters, Hutchison says. "Let's put Lyft credits into their hands and let them determine how best to orchestrate getting those out," he says. "We wanted to have oversight from law enforcement because they're the subject matter experts. They know how victimization works and how best to handle those incidents."

Giving crime victims independence has helped many restructure their lives successfully. "It's one less impediment to independence from their abuser that the National Sheriffs' Association, in partnership with Lyft, can provide," Hutchison says.

A FOCUS AREA FOR NSA

Given the safety concerns surrounding COVID-19, NSA didn't issue a new round of RFPs to add new counties to the program in 2020, but instead decided to dig deeper with the original grantees and figure out what the program's successes and pitfalls look like.

"Instead of going out and re-creating the wheel with new agencies, they've chosen to use those that are already showing success in their communities," Hutchison says. "In this way, they can get a deeper understanding of how transportation is impacting the lives of crime victims and domestic violence victims in their communities."

The Fayette County (Kentucky) Sheriff's Office (FCSO) uses rideshare credits to provide victims with transportation to and from court, to shelters, and to appointments through Amanda's Center, a unit of its Victim Services Division. Rideshare credits have helped free up deputies for other duties, as well as expand the services provided, while maintaining safety.

“Our partnership with Lyft is empowering and transformational for the victims we serve here in Fayette County, Kentucky,” says Sheriff Kathy Witt, chair of the NSA’s Domestic Violence and Crime Victim Services Committee. “Just recently, a victim on the verge of losing her job heard about our Lyft partnership while attending an art therapy event, and through that connection, was able to maintain her employment. Another mother was able to use Lyft rideshare credits to attend a critical parent-teacher meeting at her child’s school. This vital opportunity through Lyft ensures that there will no longer be a barrier for victims who are facing a choice between freedom from their abuser and reliable transportation.”

Sheriff Vernon Stanforth of Fayette County, Ohio, vice chair of the Domestic Violence & Crime Victim Services Committee and 1st vice president of NSA, says he hopes to expand upon such domestic violence prevention efforts during his tenure as the association’s 2021–2022 president, especially given the uptick of domestic violence incidents during the initial COVID shelter-in-place period.

“We want those victims to know there are resources out there,” he says. “The Lyft partnership is valuable to those agencies that have it in their community.”

Serving a jurisdiction that’s located about an hour’s drive from Columbus, Cincinnati, and Dayton, Sheriff Stanforth hopes that the partnership’s success eventually persuades Lyft into expanding into more rural parts of the country. He notes that his wife was a domestic violence advocate for many years and often needed to transport victims to other counties because Fayette County didn’t have a shelter of its own.

“They were moving out of a small area, so they could be secure in these other programs out-of-county,” Sheriff Stanforth says. “My wife would put these folks in her car at three in the morning, traveling an hour’s distance to get them to a shelter, because we didn’t have any of those services. With the Lyft partnership, we’re able, hopefully, to eliminate some of that. I always advocate strong partnerships with private entities. We don’t have to replicate everything.”

“To be physically or mentally abused is not acceptable. It’s incumbent for law enforcement to be in tune with that.”

—Fayette County [Ohio] Sheriff Vernon Stanforth

ORANGE AND OAKLAND COUNTIES EXTEND OUTREACH

As of September in Orange County, Lyft drivers had provided 173 rides to victims for purposes such as grocery shopping or health care, but not for recreational activities or visiting friends. The ride-share company provided ride credits for round-trip rides if asked, and saw repeat users throughout the year. Most of the riders were female, although their age and race varied. Interviews and interactions with these victims promoted local victim services.



Orange County (Florida) Sheriff John Mina wears a face mask advertising a domestic violence community partner.

The Orange County Sheriff’s Office reports that the project has enabled it to help victims attend court appearances and doctor’s appointments without tying up its own employees, who can focus on their core duties as a result. About the only pitfall in the process has been some victims’ discomfort with technology and the need to educate them on how to use a ride-sharing service.

In Oakland County, Michigan, the HAVEN domestic violence agency, working in tandem with the sheriff’s office, has been using the grant primarily to transport survivors to and from forensic exams. Prior to getting the grant, the agency had been purchasing Uber gift cards out of its budget. HAVEN has also been providing round-trip rides, usually to a different person each time, although occasionally there are repeat users if a follow-up exam is necessary.

HAVEN advocates offer rides when helping clients get to the agency’s site for the exam, but don’t advertise the service in order to reserve the grant funds solely for those who have no other means of transportation. Riders have been mostly female and lower-income, and of varying ages and races. Upon arrival, victims can take advantage of physical checkups and access medications for sexually transmitted infections as well as pregnancy prevention resources.

The agency has already provided more than 100 rides in the exurbs north of Detroit, says Melissa Sinclair, social action program director. “The shelter and the administrative staff are located in a part of the county that doesn’t receive a lot of busing or public transportation,” she says. “We needed a way to get survivors to our shelter or transport them home.”

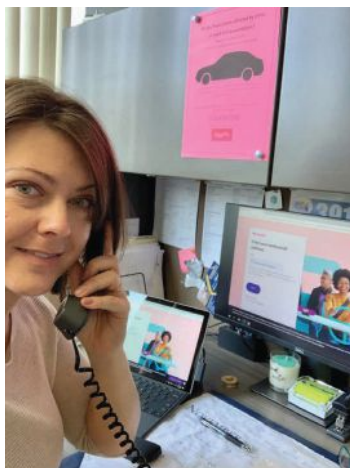
The service may aid the county in winning convictions against perpetrators of domestic violence, Sinclair says. “When we’re able to transport clients to facilities promptly, and we can collect the

evidence, it helps us to identify perpetrators more quickly,” she says. “One of the game-changers is that we can possibly see more convictions just by giving somebody a ride. And you don’t want to put somebody on a bus when they’re in the middle of a trauma.”

The Lyft partnership has made HAVEN’s services more accessible to people who are low-income and don’t want to ask family or friends to transport them, Sinclair adds. “So often, domestic violence is not something you want to share,” she says. “Allowing them the dignity to have their own ride—their own transportation—without having to rely on somebody else, is invaluable. Using Lyft removes the ability for the abuser to stalk them to HAVEN, which is also great.”

ASSISTING VICTIMS WITH APPEARANCES

By September 2020, Niagara County, New York, had provided 31 Lyft rides to persons the Niagara County Sheriff’s Office (NCSO) Domestic Violence Intervention Program and Victim Assistance Unit couldn’t accommodate. Seven of the 31 rides were round-trip; most people took one or two at the most; almost all were women; and about one-third also included children. At least three riders were recently homeless, displaced, or living in a shelter.



Suess follows up with victims by phone.

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—Melissa Sinclair, social action program director, HAVEN

The sheriff’s office has attempted to inform area service providers and government agencies about the program, and they have received referrals from sources such as the Niagara Falls Police Department and the Child Advocacy Center of Niagara. Overall, the Lyft grant program has been very successful, says Stacy Suess, NCSO crime victim advocate.

“The Lyft opportunity gave us a chance, even when we couldn’t do it ourselves, to provide people access to places they needed to be for work, for counseling, to doctor’s offices—all the things that are affected when somebody is displaced,” she says. “We’re excited about offering flex rides to people who need new rides on different days, with the flexibility to make appointments on their own and give them ownership of the changes in their lives.”

While COVID-19 restrictions have limited the number of available Lyft drivers somewhat, those who have been on shift have been extremely helpful in getting people to shelters, Suess says. Some have had to drive longer distances to help survivors because nearby shelters have instituted capacity limits to preserve social distancing.

“They make sure [survivors] get to essential court appearances,” she says, as well as meetings with investigators to pursue charges, and with probation officers to provide victim impact statements. “Our county is a pretty rural county. Public transportation is sporadic at best.”

For Sheriff Stanforth, the Lyft/NSA partnership typifies an evolution in thought about domestic violence. In the “bad old days,” law enforcement viewed domestic violence as “you separate people, make nice, and then walk away,” he says. “Within hours, or days, the cycle begins again. We have to be able to identify these things. It takes training. That’s the benefit of the Crime Victim Services Committee. We need a better understanding of victims. It’s evolving all the time. We have to be able to stay on the front end of that, as best we can.”

Do you have clients affected by crime in need of transportation?

Niagara County Sheriffs’ Office
Domestic Violence & Victim Assistance Units can help!



The National Sheriffs’ Association & Lyft has provided a grant to help crime victims get to and from medical and essential appointments as well as Family and Criminal Court.

Please contact the Niagara County Sheriffs’ Office Victim Assistance Unit for further details.

(716)438-3306

Funded by: National Sheriffs’ Association & Lyft



The Niagara County Sheriff’s Office printed flyers to post in locations potential users might see them.

“This cycle of domestic violence is sometimes deeply rooted within the family structure. The victims typically have been victims for years,” he adds. “It seems normal to them until they realize it’s not normal to be beaten up every day. To be physically or mentally abused is not acceptable. It’s incumbent for law enforcement to be in tune with that.”

Ed Finkel is a freelance writer based in Evanston, Illinois.