

Firearm Divestiture  
Program in Louisiana:

A MODEL FOR  
**DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE  
REDUCTION**

**LETTAC**  
SUCCESS STORY



# FIREARM DIVESTITURE PROGRAM IN LOUISIANA:

## A Model for Domestic Violence Reduction...and a Result of One Officer's Decades-Long Mastery of Her Subject

Lieutenant Valerie Martinez-Jordan of the Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, Sheriff's Office learned the hard way what it takes to turn a relatively simple idea—separating individuals with records of domestic violence from their firearms to prevent future bloodshed—from a local notion to a statewide effort backed by legislation that she helped draft and statewide training that she leads.

It took a lot of dogged work against some not-inconsiderable forces of inertia; the staunch support of a local district attorney's office and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); and funding from the Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors (STOP) Violence Against Women Formula Grant Program at the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW).

### All of which is straightforward enough.

Ultimately, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan learned that making firearm divestiture an institutionalized and settled change that has worked to prevent gun violence against women in a state with a strong commitment to Second Amendment rights would take a juris doctorate-level mastery of both law and law-making and an obsessive determination: to teach police officers across Louisiana how to implement the new law as intended—but also to take responsibility for doing just that. Listening to Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan talk about firearm divestiture is like listening to Michael Jordan describe the triangle offense: simply put, no one knows the subject better. It is an off-the-charts-level lesson in public service.

**"I'm very nosy by nature," she says. "I'll dig and dig until I master my nemesis to figure out how something operates."**

The law enforcement community (and the country at large) have taken notice, including The Daily Beast and the Today Show. That is because Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan has laid out a blueprint not only for law enforcement agencies aiming to reduce domestic violence in their jurisdictions, but as a map outlining the dedication, methodical attention to detail, and commitment to collaboration necessary to affect change in any area of public safety or public policy.



## BEGINNINGS

Like many stories of successful advocacy, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan's unrelenting commitment to her cause is grounded in painful personal experience, breeding in her a determination to prevent similar outcomes for other victims of domestic violence.

She grew up in a violent household in Colorado, one of six children regularly subjected to physical and sexual violence by an alcoholic father. "Rescued" from her situation by a man who became her husband, as he became increasingly possessive, she found herself in another violent relationship—even though she had, by this time, become a police officer.

Even after their divorce, her ex-husband continued to threaten Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan, so she and her new boyfriend fled in 2001 to his hometown of Thibodaux, Louisiana, along with her two daughters. As one article noted, that was "the beginning of a new life for Martinez, but also a new chapter for domestic abusers in Louisiana, a state that often ranks among the top three for rates of women murdered by men."

Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan was hired as a patrol officer by the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office shortly after arriving in Louisiana. There, the specter of her past turned domestic disturbance calls for service into a crusade for justice. Gradually, she came to isolate one threat to women's safety that stood out from the rest: violence-prone men in possession of firearms. As she notes, a felony conviction for firearms possession increases an individual's likelihood to commit future violence by 500 percent.

## PARTNERSHIP WITH ATF YIELDS FIREARM DIVESTITURE PROCESS

The problem was, while a felony conviction indeed prohibited an individual from possessing a firearm according to federal and state laws, only under federal law were persons with misdemeanor domestic violence convictions or under active protective orders legally unable to own a gun. And since it was almost always local officers rather than ATF agents who responded to domestic disturbances, officers such as Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan lacked the authority to enforce federal laws.

With the consistent support of her boss, Sheriff Craig Webre, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan requested a meeting with local ATF agents to identify a way to retrieve firearms from individuals with domestic violence-related records. ATF's response was simple: if Lafourche sheriff's deputies could get individuals with domestic violence-related records to sign a form acknowledging prohibition from possessing a firearm, ATF would be better able to demonstrate that those individuals were violating the law if, indeed, they kept a gun.

In response, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan and her colleagues set about the painstaking task of assembling a list of every parish resident with either an active domestic violence protective order or a misdemeanor domestic violence conviction. "ATF was dumbfounded by the number of people with guns," she remembered.

Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office notified 170 individuals that they were prohibited by law from possessing firearms, collected 18 firearms, and forwarded nine cases to ATF. The ATF-sheriff's office partnership has produced at least ten federal indictments of prohibited possessors to date.

In 2010, the sheriff's office mailed each person on the list a letter—purposeful in mission and respectful in tone—stating they were prohibited from possessing a firearm, asking them to sign an acknowledgement, and offering assistance in weapon surrender. Subsequent to that correspondence, if found to possess a firearm, those individuals were turned over to federal law enforcement. It was a model of the carrot-and-stick approach.

For further support, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan enlisted other allies to ensure that all requirements were met for firearm prohibition to take effect, including the 17th Judicial District Court, municipal courts, the Lafourche Parish Clerk of Court, and the Lafourche Parish District Attorney's Office.

# IT WORKED.

## NEXT UP: STRONGER LEGISLATION

But as Lafourche Parish made its gains in retrieving firearms, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan was still stymied by the inability of the law to reconcile federal requirements for surrendering guns with local enforcement efforts.

In 2014, state legislation was enacted prohibiting a person convicted of domestic abuse battery from possessing firearms for a period of ten years upon completion of sentence, probation, parole, or suspension of sentence. The law further mandated that certain qualifying protective orders also prohibit a person from possessing firearms for the duration of the order.

But because the new law failed to specify how the courts or law enforcement agencies would notify and monitor prohibited gun owners, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan took it upon herself to join with a group of legislative activists and Assistant District Attorney (ADA) Sunny Funk of Jefferson Parish (head of the parish's Family Violence Unit) to travel around the state and solicit support for stronger legislation by spotlighting her success in Lafourche Parish. Along the way, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan turned her command of firearms-related issues into mastery of the legislative process.

"When we were drafting the legislation, we knew the loopholes, even down to antique firearms and black powder weaponry," she said. "And we knew that there could be no exceptions for law enforcement or the military."

Given Louisiana's strong support for gun rights, she knew this was never going to be an easy process—and it was not. The legislation went through multiple drafts over the ensuing years, in part to ensure that the National Rifle Association remained neutral in its stance to it.

Finally, in May 2018, Louisiana Governor Jon Bel Edwards signed a bill into law adopting the firearm divestiture process created by Lafourche Parish, making sheriffs' offices the agencies responsible for overseeing firearm transfers and outlining procedures to divest prohibited persons of their firearms. The bill passed by an 89-0 vote in the state House of Representatives—"unheard of in a red state," Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan said.

With funding support from the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement, the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office was asked to share its protocol and forms for divestiture with sheriffs' offices throughout Louisiana.

"This is a momentous occasion not only for the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office, but also for the fight against domestic violence," Sheriff Webre said at the time. "We are proud to have our own process implemented statewide, but we are more excited that these laws and this process will ultimately help save lives."

For Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan, it was a moment of transcendent pride, the culmination of an exhausting commitment to her cause.

And it lasted all of a few seconds.

**"Right after he signed the bill, the governor turned to me and said, 'Now I want to see how you're going to implement this,'" she remembered.**



*May 2018, Louisiana Governor Jon Bel Edwards (seated), with Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan (third from right)*



ADA Funk (left) and Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan (right) lead a firearm divestiture training.

## ROAD SHOW

With no training program at the ready, her “tears of joy quickly turned to tears of frustration,” Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan said. “No one knew how to do it. But I’d had loss in my family, and I knew that from tragedy comes progress. The law had been passed and so we had to get to work.”

Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan put her head down again and, following long discussions with ADA Funk and local Judge Pamela Baker, developed an eight-hour training curriculum to guide police officers, prosecutors, and judges across Louisiana in implementing the new law effectively.

The final curriculum opens with a deep-dive into federal and state definitions of firearms and possession that teases out critical differences—“it’s the federal definitions that trip people up,” Lieutenant

Martinez-Jordan said—then covers victims’ rights and the new legislation (including implementation rooted in collaboration among courts, district attorneys, and law enforcement). She and her fellow presenters left no stone unturned, tailoring their menu of procedures to fit different communities, from small and rural jurisdictions to larger and more urban localities.

The result: Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan and ADA Funk led firearm divestiture trainings at 18 law enforcement agencies across Louisiana between September and October 2019, talking to more than 500 officers. Officers’ responses ran the gamut, she said; a common refrain was that divestiture would add unnecessarily to agencies’ workloads.

“Some would be concerned about having to deal with too many guns and too much work,” she said. “In which case, I would talk to them about police officers who had been killed by individuals who were prohibited from owning firearms. I would use my personal story. I’d give them my sales pitch: I’d go over the statistics of officers killed, ask them to look to their left and look to their right, and imagine one of those officers being killed.”

“Ultimately, I would remind them that their communities are paying for a specific product, which is their commitment to public safety. But it’s not like going to a store and having choices about what to buy. When it comes to public safety, citizens don’t have an option.”

And all the while, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan continued to refine her work at home. She and Sheriff Webre wrote to all licensed gun dealers in Lafourche Parish—more than 40—about the new requirement to notify local police if a buyer fails a background check. To date, her office has arrested three people accused of “lie and try” purchases (trying to buy a gun when prohibited), and she has two more warrants sitting on her desk. She has also worked to improve the quality of the cases she delivers to the district attorney, providing detailed information about perpetrators’ behavior and criminal history.

The Lafourche Parish Sheriff’s Office requires all officers to complete 16 hours of domestic violence training before being hired—more than twice the state requirement—as well as an annual refresher course.

For Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan, the cumulative effect of this decades-long education has distilled in her what she calls “the collective approach” to domestic violence, emphasizing sheriffs’ staff support for victims, employing all services available through the parish’s domestic violence follow-up unit: helping victims find housing and counseling to deal with the attendant stress of their situations, assisting them in filling out protective orders, taking them to court appointments, and even helping them to change the locks at their homes when necessary.

**“Because one program won’t solve all the problems,” she said. “It’s taken local, state, and federal collaboration to get where we are today.”**

## A NEW PARTNER: OVW'S STOP PROGRAM

In 2015, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan was told about OVW's STOP Program by a member of the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement. One of four OVW formula grant programs authorized by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994, STOP provides funding to state and U.S. territories to enhance local capacity to develop and strengthen effective law enforcement and prosecution strategies to combat violent crimes against women and to enhance victim services.

Lafourche Parish applied and over subsequent years has received \$105,000 in STOP funding as well as \$80,000 to support Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan's statewide training activities. OVW Program Manager Omar Mohammed, who oversees Lafourche Parish's STOP grant, became an instant fan.

"What Valerie did with ATF was a big deal," Mr. Mohammed said. "Working with them, navigating the system, is not easy to do—it takes a lot of networking. Valerie did her homework when it comes to domestic violence and people with firearms. Developing forms with ATF like she did, she basically looked at the situation from every angle and developed a system that works in Lafourche."

For Mr. Mohammed, it was also a model of what STOP funding was intended to support. STOP grantees are expected to convene local partners from different disciplines to back an implementation plan designed to combat crime in their jurisdictions (in turn, supported by STOP's training and technical assistance provider, the Alliance of Local Services Organizations).

"Valerie got everyone together, got their buy-in, and built trust with her stakeholders—that's what the STOP implementation process is all about," Mr. Mohammed said. "I think a program like hers would benefit jurisdictions everywhere—divesting perpetrators through friendly notification and a lawful right to enforce could be utilized anywhere. What she did was overcome the lack of resources that typically prevents implementation."

## BRAINCHILD: STATEWIDE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CURRICULUM

For all she has achieved, Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan knows well that the battle against domestic violence in Louisiana has been joined but certainly not won. Her final brainchild—"the icing on the cake, the feather in my cap, whatever you want to call it"—is a statewide curriculum to produce certified domestic violence specialists in every law enforcement agency across Louisiana. It is in its formative stages, but she says the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement is excited about the potential.

The 40-hour "specialist development curriculum" advocates for scheduling of two officers per eight-hour shift to ensure a consistent law enforcement response to domestic violence across the state, as well as to train regional coordinators to exchange information across jurisdictions.

"This would particularly help small jurisdictions that can't afford training," Lieutenant Martinez-Jordan said. "Now I just need to work on my goals and objectives, types of learning in order to know my audiences, how to teach state laws concerning lethality, how to support family members of survivors, trauma retention and recollection, documenting evidence, case preparation . . ."

## THE SWITCH WILL NOT TURN OFF; THE EDUCATION CONTINUES.

"That's because I have this fear of dying . . . and that the knowledge I have in my head [will] go with me," she says with a laugh.



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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), U.S. Department of Justice

OVW currently administers 19 grant programs authorized by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 and subsequent legislation. These programs are designed to develop the nation's capacity to reduce domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking by strengthening services to victims and holding offenders accountable. For more information about OVW, including additional program information, blog posts, podcasts, and VAWA crimes, visit <https://www.justice.gov/ovw>.

*This project was supported by Grant No. 2020-TA-AX-K033 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.*