



COOPERATIVE RESTRAINING ORDER CLINIC

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A collaborative project
for survivors of
domestic violence,
sexual assault,
and stalking,
sponsored by:

API Legal Outreach

Bar Association of
San Francisco,
Justice & Diversity
Center

Bay Area
Legal Aid

W.O.M.A.N., Inc.

May 8, 2025

Via Email

Supervisor Myrna Melgar
San Francisco Board of Supervisors

MelgarStaff@sfgov.org

Re: Support for Full Staffing of the SFPD's Special Victims Unit

Dear Supervisor Melgar:

Thank you for initiating a hearing of the Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee on the staffing levels and policies for the San Francisco Police Department's Special Victims Unit.

The Cooperative Restraining Order Clinic (CROC) is a legal services organization in San Francisco dedicated to upholding the legal rights and dignity of sexual assault, domestic violence, and stalking survivors. We provide free legal services to at least 700 survivors reach year, empowering them to understand their legal rights and options and helping them enforce and protect those rights, with a particular focus on restraining orders, family law, and crime victim representation.

For many years, CROC has worked with the SFPD's Special Victims Unit (and the previous Domestic Violence Response Unit) to provide domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking survivors with as holistic an array of support as possible. We have seen firsthand how effective the SVU can be when well-staffed, and we have seen the fallout for victims when the SVU does not have the capacity necessary to meet the need for its services. San Francisco is extraordinarily fortunate to have had Inspector John Keane and Inspector Tony Flores in the SVU for decades. The expertise of these inspectors allows them to mentor their fellow officers while also responding to victims in a trauma-informed manner that helps survivors have faith in San Francisco's criminal legal system response. Victims and survivors who interact with law enforcement officers like Insp. Keane and Insp. Flores feel heard and supported by the San Francisco Police Department.

But these highly experienced members of the SFPD cannot by themselves respond to the need.

CROC's clients come to us during some of the most destabilizing moments of their lives. They have experienced domestic or sexual violence and are often uncertain whether engaging with the criminal legal system will help—or harm—their path to safety. What they need and deserve are timely, compassionate, and competent responses from the institutions tasked with protecting them. Gaps in the SVU's capacity can erode that trust and leave survivors more vulnerable.

For example, some sexual assault survivors with whom CROC has worked tell us that they have been cautioned by law enforcement not to seek a civil restraining order while a criminal investigation is ongoing, because they are told that doing so could alert the suspect and jeopardize the criminal case. This places survivors in an impossible position: delay urgently needed legal protections or risk interfering with a process that may already be stalled due to resource limitations. And because of these resource limitations, we find that it is not uncommon for months to pass without a follow-up

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call from law enforcement to the victim. Meanwhile, injuries heal, memories fade, and critical evidence – like surveillance footage or digital records – may be deleted, whether routinely or intentionally. Survivors are left unprotected, and their chances of later obtaining a civil restraining order are significantly reduced. Given how few sexual assault reports ultimately result in charges or convictions, this chilling effect is deeply troubling.

We also hear frequent concerns about follow-up after survivors file police reports. While some domestic violence and sexual assault cases are automatically assigned to investigators, others are not. In those cases, it falls to the victim to proactively contact SVU to request that their case be assigned. While survivors are generally handed a follow-up slip with a phone number, they are rarely told that the onus is on them to initiate the next step – an onus that is particularly burdensome during a time of acute trauma. Many victims understandably assume their case is progressing, only to discover weeks or months later that it hasn't been touched. This places an unfair and retraumatizing burden on people who have already taken the incredibly difficult step of reporting the crime.

SFPD's Special Victims Unit is under significant strain, and officers are doing their best with limited resources. But the current staffing is not sustainable—and it is not meeting the needs of survivors. It prolongs harm, discourages reporting, and increases risk to individuals and the broader public.

San Francisco has long been a leader in supporting survivors. CROC believes that the city is committed to doing right by those impacted by violence. But that commitment must be matched by investment. That means hiring and retaining more investigators and ensuring that all law enforcement officers who engage with survivors receive consistent, trauma-informed training. Survivors—and our communities—deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,



Elisha Jussen-Cooke
Victims' Rights Attorney

cc: Clerk of the Board