

Victim Protective Orders and the Hidden Architecture Behind Domestic Abuse

Not a paperwork docket. A risk docket.

Hon. Sara Murphy Bondurant
Oklahoma County District Court

Why VPOs deserve judicial attention

Oklahoma's risk profile is not theoretical.

Statewide burden

Oklahoma reports high lifetime IPV exposure. OSDH currently states 40% of women and 38% of men experience intimate partner physical violence, rape, and/or stalking in their lifetimes.

Bench reality

VPO hearings are civil proceedings, but violations are criminal. The order is often the bridge between danger and enforcement.

Judicial risk

Under-issued orders can leave danger unmanaged. Over-issued orders create due process, custody, career, firearm, and credibility consequences.

The judge's job is not to “believe everyone.” It is to identify statutory risk, make clean findings, and enter orders that can be enforced.

Domestic Violence and VPOs

VPO basics

Quasi-criminal consequences, civil hearing, criminal violation, service, NCIC/sheriff coordination, and full faith-and-credit framing.

Human predators

Not all risk looks angry. Evidence may show charm, control, isolation, entitlement, lying, grooming, and technology abuse.

Judicial response

Enforce laws. Exercise discretion. Establish process. Control demeanor. Permit observation. Demand accountability.

Survivors have lost faith in the system



Lethality signals that should change the hearing

Do not turn them into a checklist substitute for evidence. Use them to sharpen questions.

- Strangulation or “choking”
- Threats to kill / suicide threats
- Firearms access or firearm display
- Separation / new relationship / eviction pressure
- Stalking, surveillance, tracking, repeated unwanted contact
- Escalation: frequency, severity, publicness
- Pregnancy, children, pets, immigration, money control
- Violation history or contempt for prior orders

Bench move: when a signal appears, ask the next concrete question: when, where, how often, witness, report, screenshot, weapon location, child present, prior order?

Oklahoma VPO: statutory runway

The clean hearing starts before testimony.

1. Venue / filing

County where victim resides, defendant resides, or DV occurred. Non-IP/family petitions require law-enforcement complaint before filing.

2. Qualifying basis

Domestic abuse, stalking, harassment, rape, sex offense, forcible sodomy, A&B with deadly weapon, family of murder victim, adult victim of crime.

3. Ex parte order

Immediate protection is possible; due process requires prompt hearing and service.

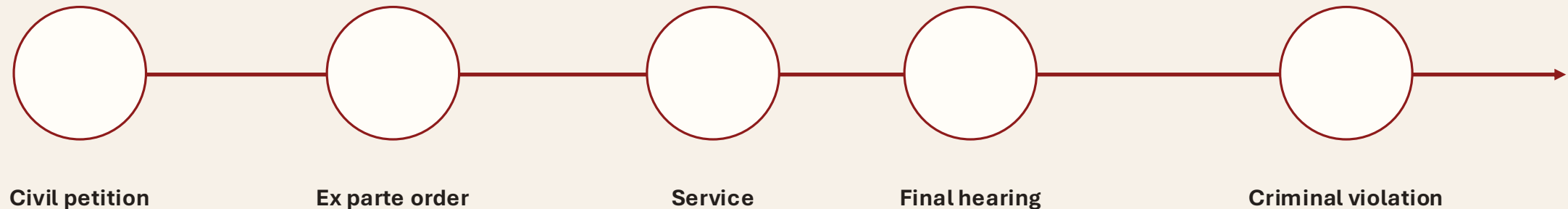
4. Final order

Terms must be necessary to stop abuse, stalking, harassment, or contact. Make terms enforceable, specific, and realistic.

Use 22 O.S. §§ 60.1–60.20 as the bench map; do not rely on local habit where the statute is specific.

Civil hearing. Criminal consequences.

Protective-order hearings are civil in nature; violation is criminal once the defendant has been served and willfully violates the order.



Record discipline: identify statutory ground, qualifying relationship or complaint, evidence relied on, findings, service status, and exact prohibited conduct.

Four Oklahoma VPO cases judges should keep in their head

Marquette 1984 OK CIV APP 25

Protective-order proceedings under the Act are civil. Do not import the criminal burden into the final hearing.

Curry v. Streater 2009 OK 5

The order has serious collateral consequences. Issue only when statutory requirements are actually met.

Sunderland v. Zimmerman 2019 OK CIV APP 27

Discovery is available in VPO cases. Manage it tightly; do not ignore due process because the docket is fast.

Kite v. Culbertson 2025 OK 3

The Act is preventative. An adult victim of a crime may seek relief; a criminal conviction is not required before the VPO hearing.

Good VPO judging is not “grant or deny quickly.” It is fast, controlled, statutory, and reviewable.

Coercive control shows up in different ways

Weaponizing
Sympathy

Trauma Bond

Friends, Family,
LEO, Court,
Clergy, etc
reinforce guilt



PTSD
Guilt
Isolation
Post-separation
control
Emotional
Spiritual
Financial
Social
Legal
Threat
Child-related
Environmental

Translate findings into the Order

The order has to enforce facts, not vibes.

Weak record

“He is narcissistic.”
“She is scared.”
“They fight a lot.”

Useful record

Specific acts: threats, surveillance, isolation, forced access to phone, finances, pets, children, immigration status, workplace, church, school.

Enforceable order

No contact, stay-away distances, firearm surrender, child-exchange terms, return of property, technology restrictions, third-party contact limits.

Bench question: “Tell me the last three things that made you afraid, and what happened immediately before and after each one.”

A hearing sequence that works in 10 minutes

Control the courtroom without cutting off proof.

- 1 Identify parties / service / interpreter / related cases
- 2 State burden and issues: statutory ground + requested relief
- 3 Petitioner: last incident, worst incident, current fear, proof
- 4 Respondent: response, exhibits, firearms, requested limits
- 5 Clarifying questions from bench; no speeches
- 6 Findings + exact terms + warning on criminal violation

Say the rules once. Enforce them neutrally. Do not let either side cross-examine through intimidation.

Evidence judges actually see

The phone is often the crime scene.

Testimony

It is evidence. Ask for dates, sequence, words used, distance, weapons, witnesses, children present.

Screenshots

Ask who sent it, when received, full thread available, number/account, edits, context, missing messages.

Photos / video

Ask date, who took it, what it depicts, injuries, property damage, location, chain of custody if contested.

Reports / 911 / medical

Do not require a police report unless statute requires it. Do use reports to refine findings and service/enforcement.

Continuance / Fifth Amendment / criminal overlap

Do not let a criminal case swallow a civil safety hearing.

The respondent's problem

Criminal exposure may exist. Counsel may ask to continue. Defendant may avoid testimony. Due process still matters.

The petitioner's problem

Delay can increase danger, housing instability, child-exchange risk, job exposure, and evidence loss.

The judge's job

Make a record: why continue, why deny, what interim terms remain, when the hearing will occur, and whether service/enforcement is clear.

Default move: narrow the hearing to facts necessary for temporary safety; preserve the record; do not reward strategic delay.

Firearms and Rahimi: the bench version

Firearm findings should be intentional, not boilerplate.

Ask

Does either party know of firearms? Where are they? Were they displayed, threatened, used, or surrendered? Any law-enforcement interaction?

Find

Make a clear threat/safety record when firearms are involved. Identify evidence and who is protected.

Order

Use specific surrender / possession language and explain violation consequences. Coordinate with sheriff/NCIC process.

Rahimi upheld temporary disarmament of a person judicially found to pose a credible threat to another's physical safety.

Technology terms need teeth

“No contact” is not enough when the contact vector changes hourly.

AirTags / GPS / car apps

Shared Apple ID / cloud photos

CashApp / Venmo notes

Fake numbers / spoofing

School portals / sports apps

Third-party messages

Social media tags / stories

Doorbell cameras / workplace drive-bys

Order language to consider: no direct, indirect, electronic, social-media, payment-app, location-sharing, account-access, or third-party contact except as specifically allowed.

When the courtroom is weaponized

Neutrality does not require passivity.

Delay

Repeated continuances, evading service, late exhibit dumps, “I need a lawyer” after prior notice.

Cross-case pressure

Custody, eviction, immigration, employment, criminal case leverage, church/community pressure.

VPO, restraining order, no contact order – NOT THE SAME!

Intimidation

Staring, laughing, whispering, hallway proximity, bringing allies, performative calm.

Green line, eyes forward, separate seating, time courtroom exit, escort to vehicle, deputy in courtroom during docket.

Counter-petitions

Sometimes legitimate; sometimes used to muddy the record. Hear facts. Make separate findings. No mutual orders.

When the courtroom is weaponized

Neutrality does not require passivity.

17 She never lived with anyone. She's 51 years old at the
18 time, had never lived with anyone. She was in love. And she's
19 going to admit, and she has said this before, she wanted it
20 more than he did. She knew that he wanted out.

21 And it was the first time that she had someone. Never
22 married, no children. She didn't want to lose him and she was
23 desperate.

24 Which brings you down to the old phrase: Hell hath no
25 fury like a woman scorned.



24 51 years old, no family, no kids, kind of a dead-end job,
25 so she's medically retired but now she has no insurance,

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1 financial issues, whatever.

2 For the first time in her life, her life has meaning. Her
3 life -- and it's sad. Her life has meaning. I'm a victim; I
4 am now the voice for victims. She's given presentations.
5 She's talked about it repeatedly. She received some
6 compensation for it. Of course, it's not worth getting shot.
7 But that's her new identity. She's done it -- she said she's
8 done it a lot, given speeches, interviews. That's her new
9 identity.

10 And please don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to shame
11 her. I'm speaking what's obvious and what's true. That is who
12 she is now.

13 And it's sad and it does happen. She now belongs to
14 something. She's now special. She now stands out. You have
15 to take that in mind.

The order that survives the parking lot

Final five-minute bench card.

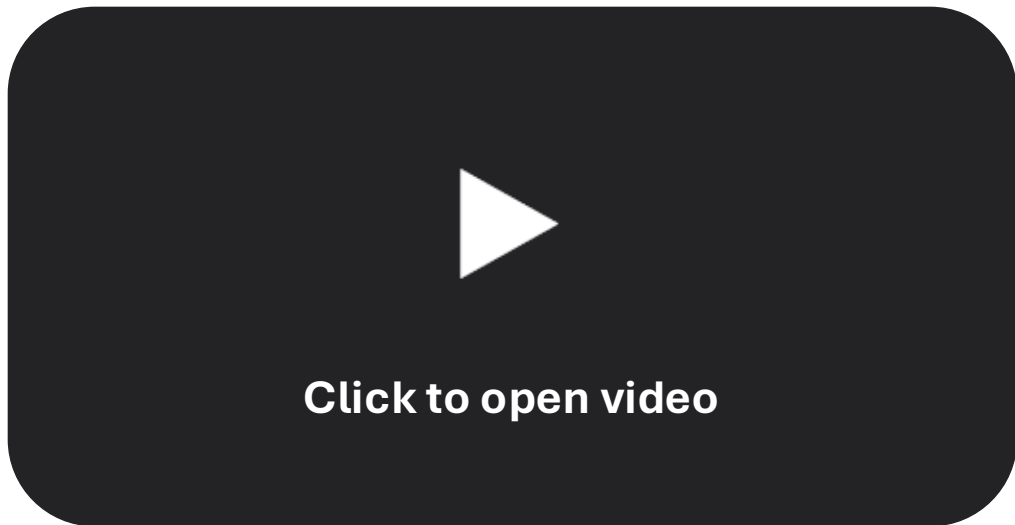
- 1 Findings** Statutory ground; relationship/complaint; acts proven; credibility if necessary; current need for protection.
- 2 Protected people/places** Petitioner, children, household members, schools, work, childcare, church, known safe places if appropriate.
- 3 Conduct terms** No abuse, threats, stalking, harassment, contact, third-party contact, electronic contact, firearm possession/surrender as ordered.
- 4 Practical terms** Property retrieval, animal possession, child exchange, distance, civil standby, service, NCIC entry, expiration date.
- 5 Warnings** Criminal violation; first misdemeanor, subsequent felony; explain exceptions clearly.

**Be fast enough to protect.
Be careful enough to be fair.
Be specific enough to enforce.**

The goal is not a thicker order. The goal is a safer, cleaner, more enforceable order.

How the Court enables domestic violence

Clip: “Judge reprimanded by FL Supreme Court after jailing domestic violence victim”



- 1 What facts mattered legally and what facts became emotional noise?
- 2 Where is the line between maintaining authority and escalating trauma?
- 3 What should a VPO judge do differently when a victim refuses, freezes, recants, or melts down?

Bench takeaway: the judge controls the courtroom - but the judge also sets the safety temperature of the room.

Sources / authorities

Oklahoma authorities: 22 O.S. §§ 60.1–60.20; Marquette v. Marquette, 1984 OK CIV APP 25; Curry v. Streater, 2009 OK 5; Sunderland v. Zimmerman, 2019 OK CIV APP 27; Kite v. Culbertson, 2025 OK 3; OUJI-CR 3-24.

Federal: United States v. Rahimi, 602 U.S. ____ (2024); 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(8).

Data / resources: Oklahoma State Department of Health IPV page; National Institute of Justice civil protection order research; SPARC judicial bench card on stalking.