It is with grave concern that we write to you regarding the details that have been made public regarding the treatment of residents at the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex (MHC). We support the work of Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW), applaud the call for further investigation by the recently convened Community Advisory Board, and call upon the Behavioral Health Division’s Patient Safety subcommittee to review the situation at MHC when they meet this week.

The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Inc. (WCASA) is a statewide, non-profit membership organization comprised of sexual assault programs, sexual assault survivors, agencies and individuals promoting the social change necessary to end sexual violence. As advocates, we understand the devastating effects of sexual assault on victims, and the heightened risk for sexual assault of individuals with disabilities, both physical and cognitive. Further, lacking proper policies, education, training, and safety measures, inpatient care units may contribute to an environment which puts residents at risk. Without proper reporting procedures or responses to sexual assault, victims go without the care and support they need. Equally important, prevention efforts are critical to the safety of all residents of any treatment facility.

Preliminary findings reported by Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW), paired with the reported comments by Behavioral Health Division administrators, paint a grim picture of the manner in which both female and male residents have been devalued, dehumanized, and were knowingly subjected to conditions where sexual assault occurred. Crimes of this magnitude warrant a swift, comprehensive, community-wide response. Many agencies around the state, including WCASA, champion a trauma-informed care response. A trauma informed care response understands the vulnerabilities of trauma
survivors that traditional responses may exacerbate so that services and programs are more supportive and less re-traumatizing.

As the statewide coalition working on behalf of survivors of sexual assault we applaud the formation of the Community Advisory Board. We are encouraged that the Board includes several members of the community who have expertise specific to sexual assault. Our hope is that the Board will listen to the survivors and allies who have been effected by the assaults occurring at the MHC and will send a clear message that the community will no longer tolerate an environment that allows sexual assault, but will work together to prevent sexual violence, protect those who are vulnerable and hold offenders accountable for their crimes.

Respectfully,

– The Staff of The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault
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