



WISCONSIN COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT



Contact:
Stephen Montagna
Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault
(608) 257-1516
(608) 257-2150
stephenm@wcasa.org
<http://www.wcasa.org/>

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WCASA SAYS THERE'S MORE TO THE STORY IN SA NUMBERS

June 2, 2010, Madison, WI – This week, the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance (OJA) released a report demonstrating a drop in the number of sexual assaults reported to law enforcement across the state during 2009.

The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA) is a statewide coalition incorporated in 1985 to support and complement the work of Wisconsin's community-based sexual assault service providers (SASP's) and other organizations working to end sexual violence. As the state's central clearinghouse on the issue of sexual violence, whose staff works to address all facets of sexual assault from prevention to intervention to policy development, they understand that while significant, the OJA report does not paint the full picture of the state's sexual violence issues.

"You would like to think that declining numbers would be a good thing; we all want to see sexual violence decrease in our community," Jeanie Kurka Reimer, WCASA's Executive Director, reflected upon hearing about the OJA report. "But the sad fact is that these numbers only reflect the number of victims who feel comfortable coming forward and reporting to law enforcement, and we know this is a small percentage of the actual number of women and men that have sexual violence occurring in their lives."

Though some victims of sexual assault report directly to law enforcement, many interact with a variety of other first responders, including emergency room staff and medical personnel, clergy, or victim services staff, such as those at the 43 SASP's that WCASA serves. Many victims opt not to report their assault to law enforcement; national crime statistics concur that sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes, with 60% or more going unreported.

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In fact, WCASA's membership have reported an increase in client visits over the past several years. A provider in the four-county service area of Brown, Door, Marinette, and Oconto has seen demand for their services increase from 965 clients in 2004 to almost 1,500 last year.

Many factors can contribute to this discrepancy. "We live in a culture where sexual violence is so normalized, many people don't even realize that what's occurred fits the legal definition of sexual assault," explains Ms. Kurka Reimer. "Add to that an atmosphere where victims often suffer backlash, victim-blaming, and other social consequences when they report sexual violence; in addition, there are some communities where law enforcement are not considered to be trusted partners, which can add another layer of resistance."

For these reasons, WCASA, in partnership with the OJA and county agencies has worked to increase training, awareness, and access for first-responders through the implementation of a statewide Sexual Assault Response Teams (SART) protocol. Members of a SART include victim advocates, law enforcement, SANE nurses/medical personnel, and prosecution teams.

This approach recognizes the need for sexual violence to be met with a victim-centered response which is focused on compassionate and comprehensive medical forensic care. Jeanie Kurka Reimer explains, "Law enforcement are an important component, but they are only part of the puzzle. Our response has to include more than just criminal justice considerations. As a community we're still playing catch-up in terms of understanding what justice means to a survivor."

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