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On Untested Kits, TV Gets It Right

Madison, WI – October 8, 2010 – When it comes to sexual assault, network television is not always seen as an ally; between advertising, half-hour sitcoms, and a string of police procedurals, the tube is rife with sexist jokes, hyper-sexual imagery, and a parade of female bodies portrayed as corpses – where violence and titillation are intertwined.

But every once in a while, TV producers get it right. Last week’s episode of NBC’s “Law & Order: SVU” (Special Victims Unit) entitled “Behave” featured Jennifer Love Hewitt as a victim of a serial rapist and stalker whose cross-country crimes go unchecked due to forensic evidence collected from victims – known as “rape kits” – going untested.

In Wisconsin, more than a thousand rape kits have met a similar fate. “We’ve failed to follow through with our end of the bargain,” explains Jacqui Callari-Robinson, Director of Prevention and Health Services at the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault. “We ask for rape victims to come forward and report, and when they are brave enough to do so, the criminal justice system should respond by processing the evidence.”

Callari-Robinson had an opportunity to talk with two of the show’s producers last month at a session on how sexual assault is portrayed in the media at the annual National Sexual Assault Conference in Los Angeles. “It is refreshing to see a television show take on the subject of sexual assault and to shine a light on this particular aspect of the issue; the timing couldn’t be better,” she added, referencing the recent passage by Illinois of the Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Act. The law makes them the first state in the nation to mandate the submission and testing of rape kits. When asked if she thought Wisconsin should take a similar approach, Callari-Robinson said “The collection of forensic evidence is crucial to getting a conviction, or exonerating the innocent. I certainly hope the legislature takes action on this critical issue when they reconvene next year.”

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