

CONNECTICUT ALLIANCE TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Support. Advocate. Prevent.

September 24, 2020

Members of the Connecticut Police Transparency and Accountability Task Force,

Thank you for allowing me to speak before you tonight. My name is Lucy Nolan, and I am the director of policy and public relations for the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence. The Alliance is the state's leading voice to end sexual violence and a coalition of community-based sexual assault crisis services centers. Our mission is to create communities free of sexual violence and provide culturally affirming, trauma-informed advocacy, prevention, and intervention services centered on survivors' voices.

Our advocates work with victims and survivors of sexual violence in various venues. We are there from the first call to our hotline for help after a sexual assault, for accompaniment at the hospital for a sexual assault kit, trips to the police station during interviews, and support during court proceedings. Our advocates work with incarcerated survivors and host support groups to help them heal, learn to cope, and regain some of their power. Our coalition educates thousands of youth and adults each year, increasing prevention and awareness efforts within schools, social services, and communities. Our Post-Conviction Victim Services advocates work with victims while their offender is under supervision with the Office of Adult Probation Sex Offender Supervision Unit and the Parole Special Management Unit upon release from prison.

During many of these steps, we collaborate and partner with law enforcement. Our member centers have ongoing relationships with police departments in their regions. Many of those collaborations are strong and victim-centered; however, we have also been a part of investigations that we believe would be more effective if trauma-informed for victims and survivors of sexual violence. I am here today because it is essential that the voices of victims, survivors, and advocates are a part of this ongoing conversation and offer what we hope is helpful testimony to this task forces' mission.

Sexual assault one of the most psychologically damaging crimes that anyone can experience and has long-term negative health impacts. Sexual assault is the leading cause of PTSD. The body's automatic reaction to trauma can result in the impairment of rational thought and collective memory. The neurobiological processes controlling victim behavior, during and after a sexual assault, can appear highly counterintuitive to investigators that have not received trauma training. Skepticism may be understandable for someone whose job entails gathering facts when the facts given don't seem to make sense, logically, and don't match what the investigator's perceived expectations would be for someone in a similar situation.

96 Pitkin Street
East Hartford, CT 06108
860-282-9881

EndSexualViolenceCT.org

Statewide 24 Hour
Toll Free Hotline:
1-888-999-5545 ENGLISH
1-888-568-8332 ESPAÑOL

Trauma presents itself in many ways. Victims of sexual violence may not remember what time or what the day the assault happened, but they can remember things very specific to the act. Their body goes into survival mode by automatically transferring the priority of brain activity away from the highly developed cortex, which is the “who, what, where, when, why, and how” recording of an event, and focuses on sensory items, such as sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, and how they are feeling. Many of us understand this process as “fight, flight, or freeze.” The symptoms of trauma look very much like the cues of deception, cues that law enforcement officers are taught to look for in interview and interrogation seminars. Reading trauma responses as deceiving perpetuates the myth that false reporting is common when only two to seven percent of sexual assault claims are false. There are no other crimes in which the victim is not believed as victims of sexual violence are.

One in six women and one in ten men in the US is a victim of attempted or completed rape; yet, only one out of every four rape or sexual assault victims report to the police. For every one Black woman who reports a rape, 15 do not. Women of color, especially Black women, may experience trauma from sexual violence as well as trauma stemming from systemic racism. For victims of sexual violence, law enforcement and the legal system may not be viable avenues of recourse as the multiple negative experiences may compound their trauma within these systems. Understanding trauma and its effects are paramount.

Out of 1,000 sexual assaults in the US, only 230 are reported, only 46 led to an arrest, nine went to a prosecutor, and five led to a felony conviction. These numbers are statistically lower than those of other crimes. Individuals who commit sexual offenses remain able to continue offending, and we know that offenders seek out vulnerable populations, such as those who are unlikely to have access to interventions. Victims need to trust law enforcement to report crimes to them, especially considering the impacts of trauma on survivors.

Sexual violence victim advocates are the bridge between the victims and law enforcement. We want detectives and police officers to understand that victims may have inconsistencies in their stories because that’s how their brains work after a traumatic experience; they are not lying and are not the offender. We want them to understand that a pat-down may incite a negative response, that the interviewing officer may remind the victim of their assaulter, and therefore the victim will not speak to them. If a victim shuts down, they are not lying, they are not non-compliant, but they are working through their trauma. By paying attention to how a person responds to a particular event during an interview, how victims are asked about the assault, and then supporting them to have space to take their time can make all the difference in a positive or negative experience at the station. Victims and survivors carry these experiences with them throughout their lifetimes.

The Alliance has several specific suggestions for and things to offer to this task force tonight.

- Ensure that every law enforcement officer and corrections officer in the state has significant and ongoing victim-centered trauma training, including how trauma affects the victim during interviews, their memory, and other unique differences from other crime victims who do not experience similar trauma. The Alliance can assist in providing this training.

- Welcome Sexual Assault Victim Advocate support for the victim during police investigations and interviews. When a victim presents to the station to report a sexual assault, the officer will call our hotline for an advocate from the local member center to stay with the victim as support before the interview moves forward. Sexual Assault Victim Advocates are state-certified and do not speak for the victim but offer support, which is proven to assist in the victim's ability to complete the interview and participate in the criminal justice process. This is the protocol that hospitals follow when a victim receives medical attention for a sexual assault kit, per Connecticut statute.
 - The Alliance recognizes that law enforcement officers may have trauma related to the cases and may have questions on how to provide support to a victim. The Alliance offers a space to process these experiences and questions. Our hotline is available to service providers, including law enforcement. It is confidential and can be extremely helpful to their mental health.

- Have at least one detective on the force that is a sexual and domestic violence specialist, which will ease the investigation for both the victim and the department.

We are at a crossroads in this country. So much of what is happening now is the result of generations of loss of power and trauma suffered by Black and People of Color, which we must acknowledge and address, as this task force is doing. Provisions in the police accountability bill passed this past summer will help victims of sexual violence. We genuinely believe that if more officers are trained to recognize and respond to trauma-related reactions, it will help everyone, not just victims of sexual violence. Some law enforcement officers and their departments practice the recommendations as outlined above, and we thank them on behalf of victims and our advocates. But like all things, we can do better as a whole. Learning about trauma is not only helpful for victims of sexual assault but also for law enforcement officers as well.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you tonight.