

Sexual Assault in Alaska: It's Time for Solutions

In the past few weeks, there have been several high-profile media reports regarding sexual assault both nationally and in Alaska. At the core of these reports are issues related to consent versus force, timing of reporting, alcohol and drugs, and what constitutes a sexual assault. For those who work with victims and survivors of sexual assault, these are stories we have heard before.

In Alaska, the plea deal and sentencing outcome, based on current law, in the Justin Schneider sexual assault case has created a wave of outrage that we believe is justified. At the same time, we see attitudes and comments showing that some Alaskans continue to blame and shame victims. We believe it is time to use this current outrage as a catalyst for change; to make it clear to our legislators, policymakers, and Alaska citizens that the response to sexual assault and child abuse must improve. Based on our combined years of experience we have specific recommendations for change, some of which are included in the Alaska [Public Safety Action Plan \(PSAP\)](#):

- **Support calls for legislation to revise the definition of sexual contact** to include ejaculate in both Sexual Abuse of a Minor and Sexual Assault statutes (PSAP item #9);
- **Reinstate and expand the best-practice of Special Victims Units (SVU) in Alaska's regional District Attorney Offices, eliminated a few years ago.** SVUs can be responsible for all cases involving the physical abuse of children, and the sexual assault of children and adults providing critical services to victims, communities and prosecutors. Child sexual abuse and sexual assault cases require specialized training and an identified person committed to each case. The Anchorage SVU is being re-opened this month—a good first step. In Alaska, it is critical that every region has an SVU;
- **Expand training for attorneys prosecuting child abuse and sexual assault cases** to include:
 - dynamics of victimization, neurological responses of victims, the lethality of strangulation, and dynamics of sex offenders;
 - the impact of cultural and historical trauma for Alaska Natives and those families and communities with generational trauma;
- **Expand funded services in rural communities**, including training opportunities for Village Public Safety Officers, Village Police Officers and Tribal Police Officers about child sexual abuse, sexual assault and the impacts of trauma on victims (PSAP items #30, #33, #35, #39, #40, #42);
- **Ensure every rural community has a clear plan for addressing physical or sexual violence against adults and children:** a process for reporting, emergency services, safety and victim rights;
- **Support a well-resourced statewide hotline for sexual assault victims** staffed by trained advocates who can listen, provide trauma-informed support, make referrals to nearby victim services programs, and assist victims develop safety plans (PSAP item #24);
- **Expand training and funding for advocates to work with adult and child victims and their families.** Advocates also offer a critical service to law enforcement and prosecutors as cases proceed. Advocate training must be specific to their roles and meet current evidence-based best practices;
- **Collect outcome data to assess service gaps and ensure program accountability.** Providers of services such as Child Advocacy Centers, Sexual Assault Response Teams, and Victim Services Programs, must be vigilant in using data and outcome measures;

- **Improve consistency of data from the Alaska Department of Law, Criminal Division**, including how many sexual assault and child sexual abuse cases are referred by law enforcement, how many are accepted for prosecution, and how many are successfully prosecuted, as well as demographic data for each;
- **Development of community-based, research driven sex offender programs** such as Bethel Sex Offender Treatment Program;
- **Continue collaboration** between the State and Tribes that help both entities as they work on proactive responses to a variety of issues, including domestic and sexual violence (PSAP item #38).

Everyone needs to understand the emotional, neurological, and physical impact of trauma and ensure that institutions and agencies serving high-risk individuals know the impact of trauma on those they serve. Without this knowledge, we cause harm to victims and send negative messages to future victims.

Child and adult victims of sexual assault and physical and emotional abuse must be a priority for Alaska. Many people are working hard to make Alaska a safer place for all victims of sexual, emotional and physical violence; we now need everyone's help moving forward. We ask all citizens to commit to a safer and more equitable Alaska for everyone.

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