

Statement in Support of Senate Bill 795

As a victim of domestic violence, I strongly urge Yes vote on Senate Bill 795. The importance of having an advocate with a victim as soon as possible cannot be stressed enough. Ninety-three percent of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, and one of the most common responses of someone who has been assaulted is to blame themselves .

Someone who has been sexually assaulted is never at fault. Period. Being hurt by someone else is frightening. It is humiliating. It is hard to talk about ever, much less in front of strangers addressing you clinically or questioning you. Victims very often do something called “sanitizing” and “diminishing” when relating their traumatic experiences. Actual penetration can become a “touch.” A full, forceful hit in the chest can become a “push.” It is a way of coping with the violence that has happened to them. Unfortunately, when a victim is in a hospital room answering questions or answering a police officer’s questions, all of these answers will be noted for use later. These diminishment will become part of the legal record. A victim’s account in those moments without an advocate’s help to navigate the traumatic situation could mean her leaving without giving a full account of what took place, without necessary charges being filed, with a criminal walking free, and yet another scared, traumatized victim trying to maneuver out in the world suffering from PTSD or other emotional and physical consequences, including threat of future harm, with no help. And if she does go to prosecute her attacker later being read the words she uttered alone and scared in an impersonal examination room, “It only happened once. No. He just touched me there.” When the story is really quite more traumatic and violent.

A victim’s advocate can help the victim heal and tell her story. When people are hurt and scared, they don’t talk. Advocacy is about being validated and heard. I had talked to four police officers, three lawyers, one judge, and three therapists, but it took one time sitting down with a domestic violence advocate who had a tool called a Perpetrator’s Map and the training to help me overcome my fears and unconscious desire to “sanitize” and therefore make my experience less traumatic for me realize my perpetrator had battered me 10 times. Prior to that meeting with an advocate, if asked, I had answered, “about 3 times.” Not because it didn’t happen or because it didn’t hurt, or because it wasn’t terrifying, but because I wanted to forget. I just wanted to forget. Even though I had written down every incident after it occurred over the years, it took over a year of talking with people, but only one time talking with an advocate, to get the painful story to come out of my mouth—to be verbalized as it really happened.

If I had had the opportunity to talk with an advocate the first time I called the police, I probably would left my abusive situation sooner because I would have realized someone understood, and this advocate could have helped me find other support I needed. One seemingly blaming question (in a victim’s ears) from a medical worker or a police officer can send her into a spiral of self-blame where she never comes back to the doctor or calls the police when assaulted again. That happened with me. I did end up leaving. But because of how I felt blamed by a police officer on a call (where I had a mark still on my body from my abuser) I vowed never to call the police again, and I didn’t. My abuser now has no criminal record. When a future victim looks him up to see if he is safe to date, his record will be clean even though I now know I am his third known victim. There are repercussions beyond helping a victim’s healing and communication in the moment, having an advocate with a victim in a medical examination or during a police interview can actually help future victims.

Let's not skirt around the elephant in the room. Victims of sexual abuse hear through the media and society, and even through legal decisions, again and again that being assaulted was their fault—what they wore, how much they drank, if they were out on a date, etc. Getting to the doctor or police takes a huge amount of bravery in the face of a huge amount of fear. Please make sure once they have surmounted that fear that they are met with a Victim's Advocate to give them the support and validation they will need after a traumatic and frightening event. Beyond any legal ramifications, on the most basic human level having to repeat a story of assault is an ugly, retraumatizing experience. An advocate should be there for the victim.

Respectfully,

Kelle Lawrence-Gaddie