



# An Examination of Sexual Assault Resource Programs in West Virginia

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## **Prevalence of Sexual Assault**

Every 98 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted (WV FRIS, 2018). This means that one out of every six people in the country has been or will be the victim of an attempted or completed assault at some point in their life. Rural communities tend to have fewer resources for helping victims of sexual assault, and this lack of funding is mostly due to the underreporting of sexual assault in those areas (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). Rape and sexual assault are among the least reported forms of victimization. In 2015, urban areas had an estimated 19% reporting rate of rape and sexual assault victimization, while only approximately 2% of rape and sexual assault victimizations were reported in rural areas (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015).

## **Barriers of Reporting in Rural Areas and West Virginia**

Underreporting in rural communities is thought to be caused by many factors, including familiarity with the abuser, isolation, social climates that foster informal authority, mistrust of government, and an inclination to conceal internal and personal problems (Ruback & Menard, 2001). In rural communities, lack of transportation and secure communication creates barriers for victims in rural areas. Often times victims in these areas have no means of transportation to seek the help they need. With few options for public transportation and often a shared vehicle with their abuser, they are unable to get to crisis centers, police, courthouses, or even hospitals. Even if the victims reach someone for help, rural areas also lack reliable phone service, leaving victims unable receive follow-up calls about their cases or their health and safety (Harper, 2019). Rural areas lack local resources for sexual assault in general.

In West Virginia's 55 counties, 43 are considered to be rural (West Virginia Department of Education, 2019). Of the 43 rural counties, 16 do not have access to local rape crisis centers or hotlines (WV FRIS, 2018). If an assault happens in these uncovered counties and the victim needs someone to talk to, their only option is to use the national hotline. This is another barrier because the national hotlines are not well versed in rural community life and are unaware of specific local resources that they could be directed to like a local center could provide. These services include counseling referrals or reporting and prosecuting accompaniment.

## **Sexual Assault Advocacy in West Virginia**

In Mingo County, sexual assault victim advocates work around these rural barriers to create a more welcoming environment for their residents. Education and advocacy are introduced to rural communities more slowly than in urban counties (Harper, 2019). One reason for this difference is that rural residents are generally more family oriented and are cautious to let strangers into their personal business. When meeting with clients, these rural victim advocates dress more casually to show that there is no power difference between the advocate and victim, and this helps to build trust. The advocates also "speak the language" of rural counties and attempt to keep conversations genuine instead of forced and formal (Harper, 2019). This careful treatment is vital to rural areas because it creates a more comfortable environment that a national hotline could not perform.

## **Grants For Rural Areas**

The Rural Program Grant offered by The Office on Violence Against Women offers funding for sexual assault victim assistance in rural counties (The United States Department of Justice, 2019). The goal for this funding is to promote collaboration among law enforcement officers, prosecutors, victim service providers and other related parties to create programs such as Sexual Assault Response Teams (The United States Department of Justice, 2019). The grants are being used to support projects uniquely designed to address and prevent sexual assault in rural areas. The Underserved Program, another grant from the Department of Justice was created to develop and implement outreach strategies targeted at victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking in underserved populations as well as providing victim services for these rural populations (The United States Department of Justice, 2019). Both grants require an application with the Department of Justice that require counties to meet certain requirements regarding their need. Almost all West Virginia rural counties meet these requirements.

## **Proposal For Improvement**

Reporting rates and resources for victims in rural areas are lower than in urban areas. The problem of rural underreporting could be improved by expanding the reach of support programs by utilizing grants for education about sexual assault and advocating for victims in rural counties. Grant funds could be used to provide transportation for victims as well as create more advocate positions and programs. The reporting rates for sexual assault would likely have a noticeable increase due to victims feeling comfortable reporting their abuse because they have local advocates who can help them through the process of accepting that they are not alone in their journey of being a survivor of sexual assault.

**References Available Upon Request**

## References

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