

SAAM Brings Needed Attention

By Sean Black
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It's one month out of 12. It's teal ribbons and walks in women's shoes. It's taking back the night and clothesline projects. It's April and it's Sexual Assault Awareness Month. (SAAM) The one month out of the year designated to raising awareness about an epidemic that impacts our society in ways too large to imagine and too small to ignore.

"Sexual Assault Awareness Month raises our awareness that it is morally impossible to remain neutral about rape and who is responsible for rape and who deserves to be supported," said Polly Poskin, Executive Director of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault. "SAAM is a designated time to remind us to celebrate the courage of survivors."

During the mid-1980s, the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault helped its members establish a Sexual Assault Awareness Week in their states. This effort followed the creation of October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month earlier in the decade. By the late 1990s rape crisis centers across the nation had expanded SAAM activities across all of April.

"When you think about breast cancer awareness and the pink ribbon, ... it's a large collaborative," said Karen Baker, Executive Director of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. "That's what I want for sexual assault as well. It's a huge issue."

In 1999, then Illinois Gov. George Ryan released a proclamation declaring April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month. It was an important recognition for rape crisis centers.

"Social change will not come without public awareness. SAAM is a focused opportunity to let people and communities know about where rape occurs, who is responsible for rape and the impact of rape on victims and our communities," Poskin said. "The community needs to know and survivors need to know that there are hotlines, 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week, free anonymous counseling and advocacy. And those local rape crisis centers are at the forefront of changing the public's attitude about violence against women."

The use of teal as the official SAAM color came earlier this decade. The national Sexual Violence Resource Center also focuses on a specific campaign each year for centers and state coalitions to use. This year the theme is, "Prevent Sexual Violence ... In Our Workplace," which focuses on employers' role in reducing sexual violence.

“I do feel that it’s major progress for all of us to be coordinated on April and on teal. And we try to put out an umbrella theme,” Baker said. “You can’t ask everybody to do the same thing, but we try to have an umbrella cohesion and people can put their twist on that.”

The routine of having a designated month does allow for an easy hook when securing media time for rape crisis center activities.

“It’s kind of an automatic thing,” said Diane Mayfield, director of WIRC/CAA Victim Services in Macomb. “They know it’s April, so contact Victim Services.”

Centers and other organizations sponsor a variety of different events to raise awareness. Take Back the Night Marches, speak outs and the clothesline projects have long been staples of the events calendar. Recently, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes marches and rallies have been incorporated into the event planning with six centers hosting marches this year.

“I love Take Back the Night Marches and I’ve enjoyed being part of the evolution of Walk a Mile In Her Shoes,” Poskin said. “Anytime you bring a group of people together for a common cause it is extremely powerful.”

The full calendars along with everyday workloads does stretch center staff’s time thin, but the cause always drives the staff forward.

“It’s stressful, but we look forward to it,” Mayfield said. “That’s our big blast to make sure we have material out.”

The NSVRC hopes to make the blast even louder. The organization is striving to have a Presidential Proclamation from President Barack Obama’s office to recognize April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

“We still haven’t had a Presidential proclamation, but I’m hopeful that we will get that this year,” Baker said. “I would like things to go faster and farther than they are but when I look back I see how far we’ve come. It’s pretty exciting.”

SAAM activities, while only highlighted once a year, are woven in the daily work the rape crisis centers provide on behalf of rape survivors.

“I think it’s very important there is a Sexual Assault Awareness Month. I think that should be a priority, but overall the work we do is the priority,” said Barb McCormick-Sommerville, manager of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago South Suburban Center Sexual Violence Support Services. “To the staff that works here, every day is Sexual Assault Awareness Month.”

Every day is a day to raise awareness and to help rape survivors.