
Governor Terry McAuliffe's Task Force on Combating Campus Sexual Violence
Chair Attorney General Mark Herring

Law Enforcement Subcommittee

Recommendation Topic:

A Statewide Public Awareness Campaign to Combat Societal Attitudes about Sexual Assault that Hamper Reporting / Victim Participation in the Criminal Justice System

Recommendation:

The Attorney General and the Governor become the faces of the Start by Believing public awareness campaign to combat attitudes that prevent sexual assault victims from reporting to law enforcement or getting the help they need from local and state resources.

Need:

Increasing sexual assault reporting will require a fundamental change in the general public's attitude about this criminal justice and public health issue through education and awareness. While law enforcement has little control over societal attitudes about sexual assault, adopting or sponsoring a Start by Believing Campaign can go a long way towards building the trust sexual assault victims need to see in order to report. Although it is a huge endeavor, there are areas of the country that are tackling the issue through the Start by Believing Campaign

<http://www.startbybelieving.org/Default.aspx>. As most victims will disclose first to a friend or family member, the first response a victim gets is crucial to whether that victim seeks help through on-campus resources, a local sexual assault center, and/or the criminal justice system. This public awareness campaign simply encourages that victim disclosure be met with belief, as the first message a victim gets can impact the way they see their own assault and can begin the first steps in trusting someone with their story. In Kansas City, Missouri, and San Luis Obispo, California, where police departments sponsored the campaign, they saw dramatic increases in the number of hospital callouts and reporting to law enforcement. There are currently campaigns running also in Utah, New Mexico, California, New York and Arizona. The goal of Virginia's adoption of the program would be a change in attitudes about sexual assault that could result in increased reporting to law enforcement.

Anticipated Challenges to Implementation of Recommendation:

There may be some misconceptions from law enforcement about the campaign around unbiased investigations. The campaign addresses those issues in its literature and explanations from law enforcement professionals who use the campaign.

Implementation:

The Start By Believing campaign has significant potential as an ongoing awareness campaign statewide. While the Governor and Attorney General are noteworthy state political figures whose presence in such an awareness campaign would be important, there is also the possibility for other state political leaders to participate and for the campaign to be utilized locally with participation by local political and community leaders.

Victim advocacy groups including the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance and the Virginia Victim Assistance Network are likely to support the public awareness campaign as it could benefit all sexual assault victims.

Fiscal Impact:

The fiscal impact of this campaign would be minimal, as most of the promotional materials are provided for free from the Start By Believing Campaign. Additional costs may come in the form of the production of public service announcements.