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Ramsey County agrees to believe



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By: [Aundrea Kinney \(/by/aundrea-kinney\)](#)





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At a launching event for the Ramsey County: A Start by Believing Community initiative Maplewood Police Chief Paul Schnell said, "As friends we can believe and support these victims. As criminal justice system providers and others we can believe and ensure that good solid investigation occurs." (Aundrea Kinney/Review)



Communities unite against sexual violence

One in six women and one in 33 men are victims of sexual assault, and only a fraction of sexual assault cases are ever reported, according to John Choi Ramsey County Attorney.

"Just in Ramsey County alone, two-thirds of all the cases that are investigated by police agencies never even come to the county judge's office or prosecution to deal with," Choi said.

On April 12, the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners decided this under-reporting and under-prosecuting has gone on too long, and passed a resolution to support the Ramsey County: A Start by Believing Community initiative.

It's the goal of this initiative for everyone to believe victims and comprehensively investigate sexual assault reports. The Board of Commissioners also agreed that Ramsey County will work with its community partners to expand support for sexual violence survivors through training, education and outreach.

North St. Paul and Maplewood city councils are expected to approve similar resolutions in the coming weeks.

"I think it's really important to support the ideas of the Start by Believing campaign," said Maplewood Mayor Nora Slawik. She expects the resolution will pass when it goes before the Maplewood City Council.

The national campaign, Start by Believing, bases its success on the premise that when responding to a report of sexual violence a nurturing framework creates a better outcome for prosecution and for the healing process of the survivor.

Last year Ramsey County Commissioner Jim McDonough, who represents the East Side of St. Paul, shared with the public his experience of being sexually assaulted by his troop leader when he was a 12-year-old Boy Scout. At a launching event for the Ramsey County: A Start by Believing Community initiative, he recounted his memories of what took place in 1971 when he was 16 and no longer a Boy Scout.

"That scoutmaster came knocking on my door, and I just was petrified, and he asked me to go for a ride and I did. And he shared with me that he had just been arrested for sodomy with one of the young Scouts," McDonough said.

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Ramsey County Commissioner Jim McDonough said that after allegations of sexual assault surfaced against his former scoutmaster in 1971, he expected authorities would talk with him about the troop leader sexually abusing him when he was a 12-year-old Boy Scout. No one ever contacted him, but if they had, McDonough said it would have helped begin the healing process. (Aundrea Kinney/Review)

McDonough said that his former scoutmaster was facing possible prison time and was looking for sympathy. When McDonough didn't offer any, he was dropped off at home where he immediately isolated himself in his room.

"I fully expected the police, the county attorney, the Boy Scouts, somebody to come knocking on my door and say, 'This just happened in your troop. You were a member of that troop. We want to talk

to you about that.' I sat there all day not knowing what I would say," he said.

When the next day came, McDonough still didn't know what he was going to say to the investigators, but as more time passed, he realized that no one was coming to interview him about the sexual abuse allegations against the scoutmaster.

"I can't say as a 60-year-old how I would have responded as a 16-year-old, ... but I can say with confidence in my heart that that first interaction about what happened, those first words to me as a 16-year old, those first questions would have really made that decision happen at that point in time," McDonough said.

Breaking down barriers

"Stopping violence in our society and particularly sexual violence starts by reporting. If people are afraid to come forward or they do come forward and they feel like they have barriers with their conversation, barriers with the system response, they will not continue on," said Rina McManus, director of St. Paul-Ramsey County public health.

In response to the initiative, the Ramsey County attorney's office plans to begin reviewing uncharged sexual assault cases and investigating system flaws that lead to cases not being prosecuted.

"I believe that we need to look in a very systemic way and review all of the decisions that are made in every phase," Choi said.

"As system providers we will and can do better in our response to sexual assault," Schnell said.

Sexual assault response training is commonplace for law enforcement, but police officers are receiving additional training in a trauma-informed technique that helps law enforcement gather information in ways that calm and empower victims so the information they provide is more coherent and accurate.

"We know that the majority of sexual assault victims will seek help from a friend or family member, leaving only five to 20 percent reporting directly to law enforcement," said Maplewood Police Chief Paul Schnell.

According to McDonough, often it is the response of a loved one who is trying to be empathetic that actually ends up unintentionally silencing the victim. This is why the Start by Believing campaign is so important.

McDonough said that it is not only the responsibility of law enforcement and the county attorney, but also the responsibility of everyone to be prepared on how to make that first interaction and respond compassionately if someone shares their experience.

For more information about the initiative or sexual assault resources please visit ramseycountybelievesyou.us.

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