

New protocol to unify sexual assault response

By Pam Chickering Wilson pchickering@gmail.com | Posted: Wednesday, April 13, 2016 9:52 am

JEFFERSON — Getting sexual assault victims to come forward can be a challenge in itself. Yet in the past, how each victim was handled depended on the investigating agency,

Already traumatized by the assault, many sexual assault victims historically have chosen to disengage, or felt too discouraged to carry their case forward at all.

A new protocol, developed over the past few years and signed by every law enforcement agency in Jefferson County and multiple other stakeholders Tuesday, aims to unify the response, starting with immediate and ongoing medical and advocacy services for the victim.

The just-adopted Jefferson County Sexual Assault Response Team adult and adolescent protocol lays out the responsibilities and roles for each affected entity, detailing proven “best practices” at each level in order to assure the best and most effective outcomes for sexual assault victims and the community as a whole.

On Tuesday, representatives from numerous community agencies gathered at the Jefferson County Courthouse to sign the new protocol. They included all of the local law enforcement departments, the state Department of Corrections, Jefferson County Human Services, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, the School District of Jefferson and People Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse (PADA).



ASSAULT RESPONSE

ASSAULT RESPONSE — Various stakeholders and every law enforcement agency in Jefferson County signed a protocol Tuesday that aims to unify the response to individuals who are sexual assault victims. The Jefferson County Sexual Assault Response Team adult and adolescent protocol lays out the responsibilities and roles for each affected entity, detailing proven “best practices” at each level in order to assure the best and most effective outcomes for sexual assault victims and the community as a whole. The process began in 2009 when the existing Watertown-based Community Coordinated Response Team expanded to include the entire county. — Daily Union photos by Pam Chickering Wilson.

“We are one of the first protocols to include a school district,” said Jefferson County District Attorney Susan Happ.

“Basically, this protocol outlines best practices for each department in handling a sexual assault case to make a more victim-centered community response to these assaults,” added Elizabeth Champion, PADA director.

A representative of each agency signed the document, signaling that entity’s agreement to train staff and implement procedures in their organization in keeping with the new protocol.

The 50-page document lays out the roles of law enforcement, community advocates, prosecutors, the sexual assault nurse examiner, the Department of Corrections, Human Services/Child Protective Services, and the schools.

Each entity has its own section within the protocol. The end of the document lists numerous resources that exist in this area related to sexual assault.

The process began in 2009, when the existing, Watertown-based Community Coordinated Response Team expanded to include the entire county.

The idea was to create a multidisciplinary approach to sexual assault in Jefferson County, starting with the development of the SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) program at Fort Memorial Hospital.

Happ said that PADA worked with the District Attorney’s Office and other agencies to make sexual assault exams available at the local hospital.

“Otherwise, victims had to go to Madison, and some may decide not to go forward with it,” Happ said.

“I remember many meetings at Fort HealthCare just trying to get the SANE program going,” the district attorney added.

Sarah Chesmore came to Fort HealthCare in 2012 to start the SANE program there.

The training required for that position is significant, Happ said. She added that the investment in making this service available locally was vital to making the whole project a success.

The addition of the SANE position in Fort Atkinson has made a difference, Happ said, noting that in the last year, 31 people were referred to the local SANE nurse, and 25 exams subsequently were performed.

As they moved forward, the coordinated Sexual Assault Response Team then worked together to create a “memorandum of understanding,” which was signed in 2013 by all of the county police

chiefs and representatives of Human Services, Fort HealthCare, PADA and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

“The memorandum of understanding was basic, but it was a good start,” Happ said.

In 2014, PADA obtained a Department of Justice grant to have a consultant work with the team to expand the breadth of its working protocol and to align it with “best practices,” as well as to recruit additional community stakeholders.

PADA took the reins in this process, referring to the statewide SART protocol developed by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

The process of refining and defining the local protocol took around a year. Serving as the local consultant was Jeanie Kurka Reimer.

Champion said that it’s important to spread the word about the development of this protocol for three reasons.

First, it shows the extent of collaboration among agencies in this community. Second, it raises awareness that sexual assault is a significant problem in this county. Third, it gives victims a sense of hope regarding the criminal justice system, which has historically been a traumatic area for victims to navigate, Champion said.

“This is a really big step for our county in dealing with victims of sexual assault,” Champion said as she introduced the signing event Tuesday.

“It incorporates the best practices into internal policies, making sure that we have a consistent, victim-centered response across the county,” she said.

“Thank you to everyone who gave so much time and energy to this process,” Champion said. “It is great for our community. It is great for our survivors.”

Happ said that during the process of developing this protocol, some of the faces around the table have changed, as new police chiefs and agency directors came in. However, one thing has remained the same — the commitment by county stakeholders to support victims of sexual violence and to hold perpetrators responsible.

Coordinators said they expected that the county would see more victims coming forward as a result.

They pointed out that the assaults already are taking place, but hopefully more people will feel it’s safe to report them, and more of the perpetrators will be identified and stopped with the implementation of this unified, tested response protocol.

Watertown Police Chief Tim Roets said that all of the local departments should be using these tested and effective methods, and this protocol document puts these “best practices” into writing.

“It mandates a professional, consistent and predictable response to sexual assault,” Roets said.

“We have one opportunity to interview a victim, one opportunity for evidence collection, one opportunity for scene analysis. We’ve got to do it right,” he said. “We have one opportunity to provide appropriate help for our victims immediately.”

The Watertown area saw an increase in sexual assault/domestic abuse complaints after that department and its Watertown-area team zeroed in on the issue, Roets said.

“I attribute that to the fact that victims knew they’d be treated seriously, that there would be a professional response,” the Watertown police chief said.

Roets commended all of the attendees at Tuesday’s signing for their commitment to the issue, calling it a “wonderful turnout,” with all departments represented.

“We have done a great job so far, but we can do a better job going forward, thanks to these efforts,” he said.