



Aggressive stance

More and more, victims of sexual assault in Lawrence County are finding their voices to speak up.

With assistance from several local organizations, the needs of victims are being met and that's good news.

Help is there for the asking.

Unfortunately, cases of sexual assault haven't gone away, and national and local statistics reflect that.

One in five women is a survivor of rape, and one in two women and one in five men have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives.

Between July 2015 through March 31, 2016, the Crisis Shelter of Lawrence County served 195 victims of sexual assault, and 40 of those were children. About 15 adult sexual assault cases have charges filed each year and about 35 cases of child sexual assault files are charged during the same time frame.

Not every case is reported to authorities, though.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, which was officially designated in April 2001. On Saturday, the Crisis Shelter will host its annual Party in the Park in downtown New Castle near the YMCA. It's an opportunity to distribute literature, share information, highlight services available to victims and engage families in fun activities.

It is estimated that last year, between 500 and 700 people attended the event.

Deborah Hennon, executive director of the crisis shelter, said it is exciting to reach out to a lot of people and it helps her agency to give back to the community.

Earlier this month, a luncheon was held to celebrate those who help make a difference in the lives of sexual assault survivors. Sue Ascione, formerly the director of the Children's Advocacy Center and now the outreach state coordinator of the Northeast Regional Children's Advocacy Center; Trooper Harry Gustafson of the Pennsylvania State Police, who investigates sexual assault cases; and Lawrence County Assistant District Attorney Jonathan Miller were honored for their efforts.

The critical nature of good investigating and forensic interviews, and solid prosecution allows victims to talk a little more frequently about a subject that is often difficult to speak about.

For survivors, it can trigger feelings of shame, guilt and fear.

With the right people in place to assist, more victims are reporting incidences to either the police or Crisis Shelter, which helps dismiss the “nobody will believe me” mindset.

That makes a big difference.

And being assured that it’s not the victim’s fault is critical.

“We’re tracking better and we’re meeting the needs of the victims,” Hennon said. “Sexual assault is so personal in nature.”

One key is education and starting early. That’s why groups such as the shelter’s S.A.V.E. clubs — Students Against Violence Everywhere — are impactful.

Hennon believes that it’s time for residents of the community to stand up and make it embarrassing for the perpetrator, not the victim.

Since 1981, the crisis shelter has been committed to providing leadership initiatives that contribute to ending physical, sexual and emotional violence.

While the numbers of incidents haven’t decreased, the plus side is that more victims are being taken care of.

We applaud the efforts of this agency and other organizations committed to looking for solutions to end the cycle.

Attacking sexual assault head on is a start.