

Breaking the silence: Valley organizations seek to empower local victims of

sexual assault

By Manette Newbold

Amy was laying in a hospital bed with an infection when staff asked her why she had sex only two weeks after giving birth. All she could think was that it wasn't her choice — her husband had forced her — but she didn't think they would believe her.

She said she didn't tell anyone about the rape for years and never pressed charges. Amy was married to an alcoholic who was one of those people who got whatever he wanted, she said. Doctors recommend women don't have sex for six to eight weeks after giving birth, but her husband wouldn't take 'No' for an answer.

"I told him 'No, I'm sore,'" she said, "and he beat me up and did it anyway. I remember thinking that this is not how your husband is supposed to treat you. I was scared. It was very, very, very painful. I took myself out of my own body. I kind of escaped out of my own mind until it was over because it hurt so bad. I hated him. I hated him after that."

Amy didn't see a doctor immediately and ended up getting a severe fever. She said the infection nearly killed her.

It was 1990 and Amy was living in Alaska where there were not a lot of options for rape victims other than going to the police. Amy said if she had been living in Cache Valley as she does now, she would have gone to a place like CAPSA (Community Abuse Prevention Services Agency), a local shelter that serves domestic violence and sexual assault victims.

"I think CAPSA would have believed me," she said. "Where I was living (in Alaska) there was no safe place to fall."

Amy's situation is not unlike many women who have been victims of sexual assault and rape. One out of every six American women has been a victim of attempted or completed rape, according to the National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. And according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 60 percent of sexual assault crimes are not reported.

One of the reasons victims do not report cases is because, like Amy, they often know the offender. Nationally, about two-thirds of rapes are committed by an acquaintance, date, boyfriend, relative or spouse of the victim, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. In Cache Valley, 99 percent of sexual assault victims know the perpetrator.

Amy said after she was raped, her husband got up and went on with life as usual.

"He was my husband so I just thought, 'What do I do?'" she said.

Another reason a lot of rape and sexual assault cases go unreported may be because a lot of victims have feelings of guilt.

"A lot of times the victim thinks 'I shouldn't have said that,' 'I shouldn't have worn that.' But it's not

their fault,” said Dionne Stirland, a CAPSA caseworker. “It doesn’t matter what they were wearing. They didn’t want to be raped. They didn’t ask to be raped. It was totally that person’s decision.”

In Cache Valley, law enforcement, CAPSA and medical workers all say if a victim decides to come forward and ask for help, they will try to enforce the message that the crime was not her fault.

“We empower them right from the beginning,” said Scott Murray, detective at Logan City Police Department. “We tell them ‘This is your investigation. We are working for you. We’ll take the steps that you want us to do. We’re going to move at the speed you want us to.’”

Rape kits

If a victim does not want to call police after an assault, Murray suggests contacting CAPSA. Unlike hospitals and doctor’s offices, CAPSA does not have to report rapes and sexual assault cases to law enforcement unless the victim is under the age of 18. CAPSA is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week with a crisis line and mobile crisis response team of staff and volunteers who can give victims advice and explain options. On-call advocates can meet with a victim in a safe location such as a police station, hospital or CAPSA and provide assistance with protective orders or civil stalking injunctions, and provide referrals to agencies who can help with things such as emergency clothing, food and economic assistance. Stirland, who is also the rape crisis program coordinator at CAPSA, said they will strongly suggest that the victim gets a hospital exam from a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE nurse). If the woman decides to do this, the hospital will have to call police, but the victim still has the choice whether or not she wants them to be involved.

Stacie Mecham, a SANE nurse at Cache Valley Specialty Hospital, said the exam includes a detailed interview about what happened during the assault and the collection of forensic evidence. This includes using swabs to gather bodily fluids, taking pictures of injuries and conducting a physical. Mecham said nurses can also provide victims with medication to prevent STDs and pregnancy. It’s a very invasive exam and can add

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to the trauma of the assault, but is necessary if the victim decides she would like to press charges at some point.

Jessica, who was raped by a classmate when she was 14, said her sister walked in on the assault and took her to the hospital for an exam immediately after. She remembers having to put her clothes in a bag that would be sent to Salt Lake City, the nurse checking under her fingernails for skin samples, and having pictures taken inside and out of her body. If possible, she suggests the victim have someone she knows and trusts in the room during the exam.

“I think it would be wise to bring someone in the room with you because it feels really violating, as necessary as it is,” she said. “Bring someone with you that you trust to hold your hand through it.”

Rape kits are free and are paid for by Crime Victims Reparations. If the victim decides to pursue the case, the kit will be the best evidence.

“That’s why we encourage an exam,” said Shauna Winder, CAPSA mobile crisis team coordinator and caseworker. “If they don’t want to pursue anything right then, they don’t have to, but the evidence is there that can be brought out the next year, three years or whatever. Sometimes when working with

rape victims we get them coming in a year, two or three years later. But if you don't have the evidence there isn't really anything that can be done. But if we have that kit, then the police can get involved and try to pursue it."

Murray said the exam should be done within 72 hours of the rape and it's best if it takes place immediately after.

"Fibers, hairs, all that stuff. After the first shower it's all gone," added Detective Scott Bodily of the Logan Police Department. "Early reporting makes it so we can collect all of that or have the best possibility of collecting all that."

Police involvement

Bodily said Logan police are informed about rape cases about two or three times a month. If the victim decides to include police in an investigation, she will be interviewed by a detective about the details of the crime. From there, law enforcement will take all available evidence and try to make the best case possible for a district attorney to prosecute.

Murray advises victims to be up front with all information about the rape, such as use of alcohol, so they can make the best case possible. Even if the victim was participating in underage drinking, that is something that can be overlooked but needs to be brought up in the beginning, he said. If it isn't, law enforcement will probably find out eventually anyway.

Bodily suggests getting all the support and help necessary to deal with the emotional issues but remaining careful about telling too many people about the rape or assault so information doesn't get back to the potential offender.

If the case goes through to the county attorney's office, the victim will most likely be put on the stand during trial to explain what happened. She will also be cross-examined by the defense council.

Bodily said the most difficult part of dealing with rape and sexual assault cases is seeing the emotional toll it takes on a person.

"Regardless of the outcome, whether there is a criminal investigation or not, it takes a toll on them. The hardest thing is just to watch them go through the emotional issues that they go through. Any one person looking at another going through something like that, it can weigh on you after a while."

Emotional healing

Jessica said she was able to attend group meetings at CAPSA once a month for a while after she was raped. She said it helped because there were other girls her age who had been through similar things. If she had advice for other victims it would be to talk about it.

"Don't be afraid to tell your family and get help for it," she said. "And it's really not their fault when it happens. I remember being really shocked that it was actually happening and really scared and not knowing what to do. I kind of shut down and blacked out."

For some victims, it may take years before they heal emotionally from the rape or sexual assault.

"I actually went into a very deep depression afterwards and stayed that way for a couple of years," said

Amy. She lived with her husband for two more years before she finally decided to get out of her marriage. "After I left him, I started dealing with it by myself. I did it mostly by myself. I had a good five or six years where I did not trust men. I didn't want anyone to touch me. I didn't want to date anyone."

She eventually met a guy at work who became her friend and she confided in him what happened. He said all the right things, she said, and reassured her that men aren't supposed to treat women that way. Eventually she was able to date again and is married again to a man she loves and trusts. She said leaving her first husband was the best thing she ever did.

Stirland suggests that rape and assault victims get therapy and CAPSA employees try to refer them to services in the valley.

"After they leave the hospital, we try to leave them with pamphlets and refer them to therapists," said Stirland. "I just tell them they're much better off. You're going to start your healing process sooner, the sooner you can get into therapy."

Men can be victims, too

— It is important to note that sexual assault and rape does not only effect women. About 3 percent of American men - or one in 33 - have been victims of attempted or completed rape in their lifetimes according to National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. Most of the rapes are perpetrated by other men.

— In 2003, one in every 10 rape victims were male according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 2003 National Crime Victimization Survey.

— More than 2.78 million men in the U.S. have been victims of sexual assault or rape according to National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

In 2007 the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice conducted a survey of 1,816 Utah females. They found:

v 28.9 percent of the respondents reported some type of sexual assault during their lifetimes.

v 12.8 percent reported they had been raped. When the definition was expanded to include object rape, oral rape and anal rape, the rate increased to 17.3 percent, more than one in six of the respondents.

v Victims suffered an injury in about one quarter (27 percent) of the cases. Rape victims were more likely to report an injury than victims of other types of sexual assault, with 42.4 percent reporting some injury.

v Victims were very concerned about others knowing they had been sexually assaulted.

v Few victims of sexual assault sought medical care following the incident, only 12.7 percent. The rate was higher for victims of rape.

Where can I turn?

Local organizations that offer rape and sexual assault counseling:

v CAPSA (offers educational counseling, not therapy), 753-2500

v Family Institute of Northern Utah, 752-1976

v Child & Family Support Center, 752-8880

v Bear River Mental Health, 752-0750

v Family Life Center, 797-7430

v LDS Family Services, 752-5302

v USU Community Clinic, 797-3401

v Comprehensive Treatment Clinic, 787-2272

v SAVVI, 797-1510