

End Violence Against Women (EVAW) International

Spotlight on Austin, Texas

What the Police Response to Sexual Assault Can Look Like

Here at EVAW International, we believe in providing positive examples and highlighting the successful efforts of community professionals who really "push the envelope," in terms of innovative reforms. This week, we would like to shine the spotlight on Travis County, Texas (which includes the city of Austin).

Website for Austin Police Department Sex Crimes Unit: "We Believe"

First, take a moment and click on the [website](#) for the Sex Crimes Unit of the Austin Police Department. When you do, imagine that you are a sexual assault victim who is trying to decide whether or not to contact law enforcement. As we know, most victims do not report their sexual assault to police, for a variety of reasons. These include the fear of not being believed or being blamed for the sexual assault - or even the fear of being mistreated by responding professionals, including the police. Now imagine this is the website you find. Is there any doubt that the Austin Police Department wants to know about the crime that was committed against you? Can you imagine how much more likely you would be to report if this were the website for the Sex Crimes Unit in your community? The following is the text from the home page:

The APD Sex Crimes Unit is comprised of a variety of professionals, including detectives, advocates, crime analysts, and prosecutors dedicated to providing the best possible service to victims of sexual assault and bringing perpetrators of sexual assault to justice. Our motto is "We Believe", because we understand the bias and prejudice victims can experience due to common misperceptions about the realities of sexual assault. We encourage anyone who has been, or thinks they have been sexually assaulted to report it immediately to the Austin Police Department. Your case will be handled with the respect and consideration you deserve.

Over the past 10 years, we have significantly improved the level of service we provide to victims by identifying, implementing and sharing best practices related to sexual assault investigations and prosecutions. We take a collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach. The Sex Crimes Unit is part of the Austin-Travis County Sexual Assault Response and Resource Team (SARRT). The SARRT is a team of professionals from within the community who work together to improve the response to victims of sexual assault. The core team is comprised of law enforcement, advocates, prosecutors, and Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE).

Working within the Austin-Travis County SARRT, the Sex Crimes Unit helps the community to provide a more effective response to sexual assault by holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes and ensuring better service to victims.

The website provides a range of information, including answers to "[Frequently Asked Questions.](#)"



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Videos: Public Service Announcement and IACP Roll Call

Even better, there is a beautiful Public Service Announcement (PSA) video that you can watch:

http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/police/sc_videos.htm

First, the video scans a street scene, with a variety of adults who briefly describe their experience of being sexually assaulted and ask what they should do. They ask, "Who would believe me, anyway?" Then the text highlights a few common dynamics of sexual assault, including the fact that most are committed by people who are known to the victim. The camera finally rests on the staff of the Austin Police Department Sex Crimes Unit, headed by Sergeant Liz Donegan. Sgt. Donegan looks into the camera and states: "If you've been sexually assaulted, please call 911, because WE BELIEVE."

The team also worked with the [International Association of Chiefs of Police \(IACP\)](#) to publish a video that can be used for roll call training for police departments, on the topic of sexual assault investigation. It should be available soon, and we will provide more information when it is released.

Publications to Reach the Community and Other Professionals

Such efforts show how a police department and multidisciplinary community partners can implement their motto of "we believe." The website highlights a variety of other innovative efforts that are underway in the community. For example, there are links to articles published in the Ft. Hood Sentinel and the local Spanish-language newspaper providing information about sexual assault, encouraging victims to report the crime, and helping support people to provide meaningful assistance.

The Police Department works in close collaboration with a multidisciplinary group of community partners, known as the Austin-Travis County Sexual Assault Response and Resource Team (SARRT). Partner agencies include:

- Austin Police Department
- Travis County District Attorney's Office
- SAFEPLACE
- St. David's SANE Program (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners)
- Travis County Sheriff's Office
- University of Texas Police Department
- Voices Against Violence
- Center for Child Protection
- Child Protective Services

Together they have published the [first two issues](#) of The Ally, a newsletter edited by Tess Sherman of the Austin Police Department. As described in the first two issues posted on the website:

The Ally was created to serve as an information sharing newsletter of best practices, current research, emerging trends, and other items of note for professionals working in the field of sexual assaults investigations. We would like this to become a forum for Texans working in law enforcement and victim services to discuss strategies, successes, and obstacles in working tough cases. The Ally is not meant as a venue for discussing active cases or sharing sensitive

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information, there are already channels in place for that. Instead we want to compile, from across the state, nation, and world, the best information you need to know to strengthen a case, support a victim through a complex system, and make your community a safer place for all residents.

Reaching Out to the GLBTQI Community: Always More Work to Do

While these efforts are important, there is always more work to be done, and new communities to reach. The team is now engaged in preliminary work to reach out to the community defined as GLBTQI (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgendered, Questioning/Queer, and Intersex).

Representatives from the Sex Crimes Unit have already met with stakeholders in the community, and conducted a training workshop in collaboration with PFLAG (Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). The objective is not only to increase reporting of sexual victimization of community members, but also to establish a relationship of trust, to help to work together toward shared goals in the future.

Conclusion / For More Information

The website for the Austin Police Department's Sex Crime Unit can be accessed at:

<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/police/scu.htm>

For more information, please contact Sgt. Elizabeth Donegan at (512) 974-5733. You can also call the Austin Police Department's [Victim Services Unit](#) at (512) 974-5000, or contact any of the other partner agencies whose contact information is provided on the [FAQ page of the Sex Crimes Unit website](#).

End Violence Against Women (EVAW) International

Vision Statement: We envision a world where gender-based violence is unacceptable; where perpetrators are held accountable, and victims receive the compassion, support, and justice they deserve.

Mission Statement: We inspire and educate those who respond to gender-based violence, equipping them with the knowledge and tools they need to support victims and hold perpetrators accountable. We promote victim-centered, multi-disciplinary collaboration, which strengthens the response of the criminal justice system, other professionals, allies, and the general public -- making communities safer.

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