

Response to Senator Franken's Written Questions from Angela Fleischer

"Campus Sexual Assault: the Roles and Responsibilities of Law Enforcement"

December 9, 2014

1. How would increasing access to trauma-informed mental health counselors help students at schools around the country?

Mental health counseling after a sexual assault is not necessarily the fix-all for a victim, but we believe that the ability to easily and immediately access the service is crucial to providing a victim-centered, trauma-informed response on campus. Counseling can take several forms, including short-term "crisis intervention" to help a victim cope with immediate trauma and immediate needs, and a longer-term course of treatment that focuses on coping mechanisms for emotional triggers and traumatic response like PTSD, as well as mitigation of future emotional and physical harm. Even if a survivor does not choose to remain in counseling in the immediate aftermath, the ability to access it and have a positive initial experience of support – however short-lived – will have a great impact on whether they will consider utilizing mental health services later in their recovery when it may be a more appealing or useful tool.

As we see it, there are several barriers to college sexual assault victims receiving mental health counseling that could help mitigate the effects of their assault: cost to students, availability of appropriate counselors, and reluctance on the part of the survivor to try counseling due to perceived stigma or a lack of understanding of the benefits. In order to increase access to counseling for victims, all of these potential barriers should be addressed. This would include prioritizing funding to allow for free counseling on campus (in a manner that would not trigger an insurance claim on a parent's insurance), in addition these counseling services would be available year round so that a survivor's work was not interrupted by breaks in school or a maximum number of sessions being reached. Also, educated referrals to off-campus therapists if the student wished, and a designated person on campus (such as the Confidential Advisor) who was able to discuss and advocate for mental health services with survivors. Indeed in our "best scenario," all Confidential Advisors would be trained mental health professionals who would be able to use their counseling skills during their interactions with survivors to both do unofficial, immediate assessment of mental health needs, and who could speak knowledgeably to a survivor about the potential benefits of beginning counseling after an assault.

2. What else would you include in legislation to increase victim reporting rates and improve the relationship between students, school administrators, and local police departments?

My primary recommendations would be those included in my initial statement. Law enforcement and colleges can:

- Become fully educated about each other's processes.
- Provide Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview training for all interviewers.

- Adopt the victim-centered methods of reporting found in the You Have Options and Campus Choice programs, emphasizing the identification of serial perpetration.
- Commit fully to an on-going, purposeful collaboration that focuses on the needs of the victim.

In addition here are some other points I think are important as well.

- We want to re-emphasize how important we think it is to have a college process alongside a law enforcement process. It is important that survivors have as much choice as possible in the avenues of help they would like to pursue.
- We also believe one of the reasons survivors sometimes come forward to college officials first is because they are concerned about “ruining” someone’s life. We urge caution around creating any kind of system where an accused student’s record follows them wherever they go. Colleges need to feel empowered to keep their campus safe with suspensions, expulsions or any other disciplinary action without feeling as though they may be taking away someone’s right to education. Truly, they are taking away the right to an education at that institution but not everywhere.
- At SOU we have a specially trained hearings board for sexual misconduct cases. There are no students on this board; they are all specially identified staff who have experience or knowledge of this field. They have also received outside training in the dynamics of sexual assault and domestic violence as well as a yearly training provided by our Assistant Director of Student Support and Intervention, for Community Standards. We think it is imperative that colleges and universities have a specially trained body of people to handle these cases.
- Lastly, we have a monthly meeting, including our community partners to review our on campus response to sexual assault. One thought about this bill is perhaps stipulating a number of meetings between law enforcement and campuses for collaboration per year.