

Napa Valley Register

Support for sexual assault victims continues despite pandemic

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Heather Bailie, Sharon DeMarco, and Agnes Dziadur

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The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shelter-in-place orders can be an exceptionally scary time for those who are suffering from family violence and sexual abuse and do not feel safe in their own homes. It might feel like there is no safe place to go or no one to turn to.

Sexual harassment, assault and abuse do not end during a crisis, and local experts fear cases may actually be getting worse due to stress and isolation caused by the pandemic and stay-at-home orders, especially for children. In response, Napa County Sexual Assault Victim Services, the Napa County District Attorney's Office, and the Napa County Courage Center would like to shed light on this issue, and provide some resources and services that are available to our greater Napa community.

The problem faced by many sexual assault survivors during this pandemic can be exacerbated for children who experience abuse. Isolated at home, they are often alone with the people who abuse them and, with schools out of session for so long, are without access to friends, teachers or trusted adults in whom they could confide, thus decreasing the opportunity for victims to disclose abuse and access support. Under normal circumstances, these individuals might be able to spot the signs of sexual abuse, but now we are faced with a silent epidemic happening behind closed doors, hiding the true extent of sexual abuse and family violence in our community.

The Napa County District Attorney's Office is among the essential workers in the community partnering with the Courage Center, the county's Child Advocacy Center (CAC) to protect the younger residents of the county. The District Attorney's Office has been open during the duration of the pandemic and throughout the shelter-in-place orders. The District Attorney's Office remains committed to providing support and services to survivors of sexual abuse, especially during these trying times, and to prosecuting the perpetrators of these serious crimes to the fullest extent of the law.

The District Attorney's Office also has our own division of experienced victim-witness advocates who are available to assist victims of child abuse, and provide further resources as well. They can be reached at (707) 299-1414.

For over a decade, the Courage Center has discreetly met with children and their families who have been subject to childhood sexual assault, physical assault, neglect and have been witness to domestic violence. As the county's CAC, the Courage Center works as a collective of professionals that range from victim advocates, child welfare services, nurse examiners, deputy district attorneys, mental health professionals and law enforcement to protect the children in our community.

During the pandemic, the Courage Center has also had to adjust to doing business following the new public health guidelines. Our county's child sexual assault interviews have moved to using technology that is secure and confidential as a remote platform to maintain safe and proper physical distancing. Other measures such the use of personal protective equipment and continuous sanitization of our center are in place to reduce the number of new COVID-19 cases in the county.

We provide victims and their non-offending caregivers full support and guidance from the initial point of contact, through the required investigation, victim compensation, the judicial process, and ultimately the road to recovery through our mental health partners. We all are committed to making sure the community is aware that services are still accessible for child victims. Please feel free to reach out to the Courage Center at (707) 225-3802.

Furthermore, Sexual Assault Victim Services (SAVS), a program of NEWS Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Services, continues to provide its services to all children and adult survivors and their loved ones during the time of COVID-19.

As a committed public partner, the health and safety of SAVS clients and staff is paramount, and the agency is following public health official's directions in regard to COVID-19. Despite moving to remote operations, SAVS staff remains available to provide free and confidential services to support those in need through telephone and technology platforms. This includes immediate emotional support, support during multi-disciplinary interviews, forensic medical examinations and assistance with protective orders.

Individuals who wish to speak with a sexual assault advocate about past or present sexual abuse or wish to make a report, can contact the NEWS helpline at 707-255-NEWS (6397). During this time of escalated stress and anxiety, NEWS' staff is available to the public 24 hours a day to provide compassionate trauma-informed care, help answer questions and coordinate any services that may be needed.

Finally, our Napa County law enforcement partners, the Police Department, the Sheriff's Office, Calistoga Police Department and St. Helena Police Department as well as Napa

County Child Welfare Services, remain open and committed to investigating crimes of sexual abuse and serving victims and their families. If you know of, or suspect, a child in danger, please report child abuse and neglect to Child Welfare Services at (707) 253-4261 or 1-800-464-4216 (after hours); or in the case of emergency, to any law enforcement agency at 911.

Heather Bailie, Sexual Assault Victim Services

Sharon DeMarco, Napa Courage Center

Agnes Dziadur, Napa County District Attorney's Office