

Systemic changes needed in rape-kit testing process

Women's Center wants resources devoted to plan

By REBECCA L. WHITE

FOR nearly 35 years, the Houston Area Women's Center has been at the forefront of supporting and advocating on behalf of rape survivors at the local, state and national level. For every survivor, every man, woman and child who comes to us for help, we provide a safe and supportive environment in which to share their stories of survival, their fears and frustrations. When survivors have chosen to report the crimes committed against them to law enforcement and have endured the invasive evidence-collection process, we have been here to provide guidance, resources and support to help them deal with the unanswered questions, the self-blame and self-doubt that arises when survivors learn they

are not a priority in the eyes of the law.

No one believes the backlog of untested rape kits is acceptable ("Never-ending scandal; Will HPD's crime lab ever get fixed?" Page B8, Thursday). The failure to process the kits and pursue justice for victims is inexcusable. We also acknowledge that there has been misinformation and misunderstanding in many of the discussions surrounding the backlog. We know the system is broken and survivors are paying the ultimate price.

However, we believe that speaking out without standing up is not conducive to fixing the problem. We need solid information about how the problem evolved so that we can work collaboratively on the necessary changes to avoid similar problems in the future. To simply test the current backlog without rectifying the systemic causes would be a waste of resources and would not serve the best interests of victims.

When the National Institute of Justice awarded federal funding to Houston to once

and for all create systemic changes that will correct the rape kit testing process and create effective, efficient and humane protocols for moving forward, the Women's Center was honored to accept the invitation to participate. The other members of this project include research experts, forensic nurses and criminal justice professionals, all of whom have a vested interest in fixing the system, correcting the backlog and creating protocols that will prevent history from repeating itself. The Women's Center welcomes the opportunity to educate fellow committee members on the positive and negative implications various actions and inactions have had on survivors and their access to and trust in the criminal justice system. Our intention is to ensure every possible option and opportunity for survivors is considered and evaluated before it is instituted.

The Women's Center has made its role on this task force a No. 1 priority, and we plan to uphold the rights and interests of all survivors throughout the planning and implementation phases. While this is a Houston-centered project, this is by no means a Houston-only problem. The processes and protocols that result from this project will be shared and replicated in other major

cities, providing workable solutions on a national scale.

At the end of the day, we want a solid and sustainable plan that awards proper and ongoing priority and resources to rape cases so that survivors' rights and well-being are protected, and offenders are held accountable for their crimes.

White is president and CEO of the Houston Area Women's Center.

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