

ADVOCATES CAN HELP END THE CYCLE OF SILENCE

Most victims of sexual assault do not report the crime to law enforcement. Many never tell anyone. Then because so few assaults are reported – most perpetrators walk free – and survivors don't get the help and support they need.

For months I ignored the truth, but then I found out I had a STD and everything that I had been repressing came to the surface. I had convinced myself I had wanted it because I had consented to foreplay. But I never said yes to sex. I explicitly said I wouldn't sleep with him without a condom, but he did it anyway saying, "Just a little bit." I can't get that phrase out of my head. I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking that I should have made him stop or tried to make him stop earlier. The truth is I never wanted him to start and I told him that. But now that I'm finally believing myself, I feel destroyed.

It's time to end this cycle. As an advocate, you can take the lead.

WHAT IS START BY BELIEVING?

Start by Believing is a public awareness campaign designed to end the cycle of silence and change the way we respond to sexual assault. It was first launched in April 2011. Since then, thousands of professionals across the country and around the world have made their own personal commitment. This includes many advocates such as yourself:

My name is Tonya. I am a Victim Advocate in Crawford and Harrison Counties in Southern Indiana for Hoosier Hills PACT. I am also a sexual assault survivor. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is Yolanda. I am a strong advocate for survivors of sexual violence. I have family and friends who are deeply impacted. I especially care about the Navajo children. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is Tina Orme. I am a victim advocate with South Salt Lake Police Department and I care about how we all respond to victims who have been raped or sexually assaulted. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is Michael. I am a victim advocate with the DOD and ARISE out of New Mexico. I believe our nation's military when they say I was raped: men and women. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.



But it's more than just a personal pledge. By transforming personal and professional responses to sexual assault, we can help victims pursue justice and healing.

Failed responses... additional victims.

Stop the cycle and make our communities safer.

WHY IS THE PLEDGE IMPORTANT?

Decades of research demonstrates that sexual assault victims are often doubted or blamed, and these negative responses have a number of harmful effects. They also decrease the chance that victims will report the crime and reach out for help. As an advocate, you may have witnessed this firsthand.

I am a 20 year old male, who was raped. When it happened, I was completely in shock. I felt no sense of security, and was terrified to leave my apartment for days. I was unsure what to do, so I decided to try to file a police report. When I had told an officer about what had happened, I was answered with laughter and the words "Men don't get raped." So I carried on with my life, until I had it happen again. Soon after, I had completely given up on looking for ways of help.

This is why the message of Start by Believing is so vital - outcomes will only change when sexual assault reports are investigated from an initial presumption of merit.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ADVOCATES?

Because of the nature of their supportive role, advocates are taught to Start by Believing victims of sexual assault. An advocate's core value is to be present with victims in the aftermath of their assault, and to provide emotional support, reassurance, validation. Essentially, advocates cannot do their job if they do not Start by Believing.

While the research is somewhat limited, the consistent conclusion is that advocacy services facilitate victim recovery and increase access to other services in the community response system. To illustrate, [one study](#) was conducted with victims of sexual assault who presented to the hospital emergency departments. Results of that study indicated that victims who had the assistance of an advocate received medical services at higher rates than are typically documented in the research literature. Also, when an advocate was involved, victims were more likely to have a police report taken and their case was more likely to be investigated by law enforcement.



In other words, victims who worked with an advocate were less likely than others to blame themselves for the sexual assault and less reluctant to seek further help from community response systems. As a result, they received more services from community professionals and had better recovery outcomes.

If advocates do not Start by Believing, how will victims benefit from their services?

TAKE THE PLEDGE

Start by making your own personal commitment to Start by Believing.

- I pledge to Start by Believing when someone tells me about their sexual assault.
- I pledge to help survivors on the road to justice and healing.
- I pledge to end the cycle of silence.

[Pledge now](#)

SPREAD THE WORD

Then share the message with others. We have all the tools you need. Check out our [personal action kit](#) and [community action kit](#) to learn how to get started.

Encourage other advocates to make the pledge: Do you work for a non-profit sexual assault center? Or a dual services agency? Get everyone to take the pledge – staff, volunteers, and the Board of Directors. Are you a system-based advocate? Spread the word to others in your agency, especially law enforcement officers and prosecutors who can help victims to pursue justice.

Provo, Utah
Police Department
Victim Services



Brought to you by End Violence Against Women International, America's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving criminal justice responses to sexual assault.

Display posters or brochures with the Start by Believing logo in prominent areas where victims and their loved ones will see them, such as the waiting area, support group room, and on your agency website.

Use your systems advocacy skills to inform criminal justice professionals about Start by Believing and encourage them to take the step to make the pledge.

Challenge other service providers to join you by taking the Start by Believing message to your next community roundtable or presentation. Inform other social service providers to Start by Believing when their clients tell them about their experiences of sexual assault victimization.

Create a committee to launch a Start by Believing campaign in your community. If you have a Sexual Assault Response and Resource Team (SARRT), this is a great place to start. See our [community action kit](#) for the information and tools you need.

Kick off your campaign with a press conference: Follow the example of Denver, Colorado, where their event was a true representation of what multidisciplinary collaboration looks like. Participants included Mayor Michael B. Hancock's office, the Denver District Attorney's Office, the Denver Department of Public Safety, the Denver Police Department, the Denver Sheriff Department, the Denver Fire Department, Denver Health Medical Center, the Sexual Assault Interagency Council, and The Blue Bench (a community-based sexual assault advocacy program). Also featured was a [young male survivor and his mother](#).

Use social media: Let your virtual audience know about your agency's commitment to Start by Believing. And don't forget to use #StartbyBelieving.



Use marketing connections to reach thousands: As an advocate, marketing resources may be limited within your agency. However, you may be able to elicit the support of someone in your community who is willing to donate time or advertising space. For example, in Kansas City, Lamar Advertising donated space on 17 billboards across the metropolitan area to display a Start by Believing message.

Lamar Advertising in Kansas City, MO donates billboard space across the state.



Need more support? Give us a call or send an email at info@startbybelieving.org. We're here to help your community join the hundreds of others transforming our response to sexual assault. Thank you for becoming a Start by Believing ally!

