

This article is part of a project of the local Community Health Improvement Council (CHIC). CHICs were created statewide in conjunction with the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) with the goal of getting local citizens and county governments more involved in the manner in which health might be improved in each of their communities. The local CHIC is conducting an on-going awareness campaign addressing all the areas that can potentially affect a person's health. April has been dedicated to violence's impact on health. The link between mental and physical health has been well established in scientific literature and therefore, is recognized as a public health issue. Trauma associated with experiencing or witnessing violent crimes can have long-term effects, costing victims both emotionally and monetarily, impacting their overall health. Domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse are three violent crimes that are occurring at epidemic rates.

Victims of crime are often shuffled through the judicial system with feelings of confusion, anger, and re-victimization. For many years, victims have asked, "Why does the defendant have all the rights? What about my rights?" These questions were finally addressed locally, in 1992, when victims' rights became part of the New Mexico State Constitution and enacted in 1994 with the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). The purpose of the act is to ensure that the full impact of the crime is brought to the attention of the court, victims of violent crimes are treated with dignity, respect and sensitivity at all stages of the criminal justice process, and victims' rights are protected by law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and judges as vigorously as are the rights of criminal defendants.

The first "Crime Victims' Rights Week" was proclaimed in April of 1981 by President Ronald Reagan. Each April since, communities across the country observe National Crime Victims' Rights Week, bringing attention to the devastating traumas faced by crime victims and recognizing those who advocate for them. This year's National Crime Victims' Rights Week is April 21-27.

April has also been designated Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) in the United States. The goal of SAAM is to raise public awareness about sexual violence and educate communities and individuals on ways to prevent it. By working together and pooling our resources, we can highlight sexual violence as a major public health, human rights and social justice issue and reinforce the need for prevention efforts. The 2013 theme for our community is "Break the Silence on Sexual Violence!"

Sexual assault is the least reported crime to law enforcement mainly because victims fear they won't be believed or they will be blamed for the assault. Silence keeps a community in the dark about the amount of sexual assault and violence that occurs. Every two minutes someone in the US is sexually assaulted, that's over 200,000 victims per year. 44% of victims are under the age of 18 and 80% are under the age of 30. Approximately 2/3 of assaults are committed by someone known to the victim.

If you are a parent, grandparent, guardian, or someone who works with children, learning about sexual development and healthy sexuality is key to preventing child sexual abuse. Healthy sexuality incorporates: self-esteem, values, boundaries, respect, and personal awareness.

When children have accurate, ongoing, and age-appropriate information, they will be more confident and better equipped to handle an uncomfortable and inappropriate situation, should one arise. Types of information include: anatomically correct names for "private parts", when touch is harmful and abusive, and that the abuse can occur from someone they know, such as a family member or older, stronger child.

The earlier children learn this information (suggested age is four years), the more comfortable they will be in their ability to protect themselves or disclose to a trusted adult. It's not uncommon for parents to have questions about how to approach the topic with their children. Many parents feel uncomfortable verbalizing anatomically correct words to their young children and may find it helpful to practice saying them aloud to themselves in a private location, such as on the drive to work, before talking with their children. When parents are comfortable with the conversation, children will understand that the subject is not something to be ashamed of and that they can talk about it with their parents or other trusted adult.

Historically, programs such as "Stranger Danger" were taught to alert children of the dangers of being abused or abducted by a stranger. However, studies have shown that a majority of sexual abuse cases involve an individual known to the child victim, such as a relative, family friend, or other child. For this reason, the "Stranger Danger" curriculum has been replaced with more appropriate curriculums that teach children that it's not ok for ANYONE to touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.

Dr. Betty Caponera of the New Mexico Interpersonal Violence Data Central Repository reported that 245 out of 281 children under the age of 12 years, was sexually abused by someone known to them. "Approximately three-quarters (77% of 189) were victimized by a family member, 17% (41) by an acquaintance, and 1% (3) respectively, by a stranger or brief encounter".

For more information about these topics, services available, and related April events, visit <http://sanjuancountydvsataskforce.wordpress.com/>

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