

I'm a Survivor....what are my options?

By Beth Birch of The Abuse Network, Inc. of Huntington, Juniata and Mifflin Counties

For many survivors of sexual abuse, seeking services may seem like an overwhelming experience and many can find themselves processing countless questions. What type of help is available? What are my options? Where can I go for help? Can I trust the person I am speaking with to protect my confidentiality? How do I know this agency or person has the skills to work with my situation?

The Abuse Network, and the other rape crisis centers which provide services to the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, have a variety of options to assist. Funded and credentialed by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, local centers are able to assist victims/survivors, their family, friends, and loved ones 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These centers are staffed with specially trained advocates who have a wide understanding of sexual violence in all its forms and who can respond to you with an array of services designed to meet the unique needs of each person.

Counseling that is *free* and *confidential* is one of these important services. Our counseling options focus on supportive listening, feedback, and clarification of options available. They are empowering and put the survivor at the forefront of their recovery. These services respond to the unique needs and experiences of each survivor.

Advocates are also available to provide advocacy and accompaniment services in medical and legal settings. Medical advocacy provides services to those who seek medical treatment options after an assault. Advocates are available to accompany victims to the hospital or other medical facility during which time advocates assist by notifying the victim of the medical options that are available to them. Survivors are consistently informed about the medical examination throughout the process and notified about their rights. In this way, the victim/survivor is empowered to make informed decisions about their bodies and options moving forward.

The legal system can be frightening and perhaps confusing in the wake of an assault. Among the goals of legal advocacy is for the advocate to act as a link between the victim and the legal system. Advocates will inform survivors of their rights, assist them with information that will help them to make knowledgeable choices, and prepare them for what they may experience as they navigate the legal system. Victims/survivors may be accompanied to any number of legal events such as interviews with law enforcement or university administration, hearings, case trials, and sentencings.

The needs of victims/survivors are diverse and each person who seeks assistance requires options that are specific to them. Another valuable service local centers offer is the ability to help those they help make connections and relationships with other local service providers. Centers have collaborative relationships with these other agencies, and with the survivor's consent, we can offer prompt referrals to much needed resources.

Knowing about some of the many services and options available from local rape crisis centers can help to alleviate the concerns of anyone who may be considering reaching out for assistance.

If you or someone you know is in need of assistance after their assault, please consider contacting your local rape crisis center to discuss your options.