

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN
RAPED??



maybe you need to talk
about it.



Take Back the Night

Can Springfield respond in time to the crisis of assaults on women?

By Harvy Lipman

Eileen Harris is fed up. A mother of two young children, Harris works a job which often requires her to come into downtown Springfield late at night. In the past four months, she has been physically assaulted on two different occasions. She may not be coming into downtown quite so often any more.

One weeknight four months ago, Eileen parked her car on Byers Street and walked downtown to do some shopping.

"It was about 9:30 when I got back to my car," she told us. "I unlocked the car and put my groceries in, but before I knew what was happening this man came up behind me and jumped on me. I tried to crawl across the front seat to get out the other door, but there was another man waiting for me. They took me for a little joy ride around the city."

After being physically assaulted, Harris called the police and filled out a complaint. The two men have not been apprehended.

"My sense of security has never been fully recovered. After that night I never felt free. I've stopped walking through the city in the darkness."

But even avoiding the streets of Springfield at night has not been enough to protect Eileen Harris' safety. On May 17 she was walking along Main Street near City Hall.

"It was about 7:45, still twilight. About eight kids came riding by me on bicycles, and then all of a sudden they were all over

me. One passes me and grabs me in a sexual way. They were only about 10 to 12 years old! They converged in front of the Forbes & Wallace building and came back at me four abreast on the sidewalk."

The kids taunted Eileen and threatened her physically.

"As the third bike went by, I was struck on my side. I looked around and the passenger on the bike was carrying an iron bar."

She tried standing up to the kids, threatening to call the cops, but it did no good.

"They surrounded me on the sidewalk. The one with the iron bar got off the bike and came at me with it in his hand. He said he was going to bash my head in. He was behind me, so I turned to face him. I kept looking searchingly for help at the cars passing by on Main Street and the people going into Johnson's Bookstore."

It was obvious the young woman was being assaulted, but not one stopped.

"I broke through them and started walking away. As I ran into the bookstore they were right on my tail."

She went into the basement and phoned the police, but before they arrived Paul Johnson, one of the store owners, came down to tell her not to leave by the front door.

"The kids were barricading the door," she continued. "Mr. Johnson told me they were just waiting out there and harassing his customers."

By the time the cops arrived, the kids had departed. Johnson recognized one of them as being a youngster on whom the store had obtained a trespassing warrant. Despite the

identification, the police didn't file a report for several days until Harris called to demand an investigation. She says police told her the reason for this inaction was the cops' knowledge that the courts would only let the kids off with a warning anyway, so why bother?

It Only Gets Worse

But this is not a story about police incompetence or insensitivity. It is a story about a serious problem that exists not only in Springfield but around the country—the increasing harassment and abuse of women in our urban society.

It is a story about how our city, state and federal governments have reacted—or, more frequently, failed to react—to solve this problem. Eileen Harris did not come to us for sympathy, she came because she wanted to speak out, to say something needs to be done and nobody in a position of authority seems to want to do anything.

After her first assault, Harris contacted the Hotline to End Rape and Abuse. She says the organization was very supportive and helpful in getting her over the initial reaction to her trauma. After the second assault she contacted HERA again, but this time for a different reason.

"I want this to get some attention. I need some kind of platform, some way to develop an outcry to solve the problem."

Can HERA Help?

Supported by HERA training coordinator Bette Taylor and Collette Roberts, head of the local chapter of the National

Organization for Women, Eileen went to a meeting with Charlie Kingston, aide to Mayor Ted Dimauro. What the women were after was a commitment from the city, not just to increased police protection downtown, but to support for groups like HERA in aiding victims of abuse and educating the public.

HERA is in desperate need of such support. Had Eileen Harris' need for their help arisen after this coming September, there would have been no HERA to turn to. That is when the group's current funding runs out. Unless new funding sources come forward, the Springfield area's only rape hotline and counseling center will cease to exist in a matter of months.

"Right now we have funds secured until September," explained HERA Director Ellen Gavin. "We have a grant from the Dexter Fund for rape crisis work (about \$26,000), a contract with the state Department of Public Welfare until November for counseling (about \$9,000) and a number of small private grants."

Though HERA expects to be able to secure new grants from the welfare department, that is not enough to keep its

HERA Director Ellen Gavin, facing the termination of the group's funding, says, "the crucial thing we want to see is a commitment from the city for rape crisis services." (Donn Young photo)

Harvy Lipman covers Hampden County for the Advocate.



These are the women who staff HERA, offering counselling and other help to assault victims like Eileen Harris (on cover). They say that rape and abuse is the fastest growing crime in the country. (Donn Young photo)

24-hour hotline, shelter for battered women and counseling program going. According to Bob Van Wart, president of Community Council of Springfield and secretary to the Community Funds Advisory Committee (which oversees the Dexter Fund and three other charitable foundations for Valley Bank), the fund does not give out long-term, renewable grants.

"We considered the grant seed money to get them started," Van Wart said. "Ongoing grants are not in the nature of these foundations."

Where does HERA turn for funding?

"The crucial thing we want to see is a commitment from the city for rape crisis services," Gavin emphasized. "There is no state or federal money available specifically for grass roots women's organizations doing rape counseling. We've gotten no response from the city, the United Way or the state Department of Mental Health. No one has been helpful in pointing out a direction in which to go."

Thanks to the meeting with Kingston, that appears to be changing. The mayor's aide agreed to set up a meeting between HERA and Ray Warren, the city's grantsman. Warren's job is to develop and link up with outside funding sources for use by city groups. He told us there might be some funding available through ACTION (the federal volunteer program), but indicated he couldn't make any specific recommendations until after his meeting with Taylor.

Both Eileen Harris and the staff at HERA, however, think there are other things the city could do.

"We're talking about services for the victims," Gavin pointed out. "We'd also like to see more money for community education. We just finished previewing films around rape for high school students. We need more education around rape and battering."

Youth Crime

"Unless we spend the money on our youth, we'll spend the money anyway on the courts, the jails and repairing the property damage," added Nancy Lyman, HERA's co-ordinator of volunteers.

The organization is not advocating stiff jail sentences for youthful offenders, Gavin emphasized.

"I get nervous about that, because we know some judges' typical attitudes are lock 'em up and throw away the key," she noted.

"Part of the answer would be money for recreation programs for these kids," Lyman continued. "I live in a neighborhood where the kids have to play ball in the streets. I have a 10-year-old daughter, and almost every day she's threatened with rape by 11-year-old boys in the street. I go out and talk with them, try to deal with them, but they threaten women, too. These are the same age kids as the ones who harassed Eileen Harris. The oldest is maybe 13 or 14."

"The real problem," Gavin interjected, "is violence in general and sexual violence in particular. Young males are inundated with the idea that it's entertainment."

"And young girls are supposed to enjoy it," Lyman added.

Both Taylor and Harris have contacted City Councilor Bob Markel about different aspects of the problem; Taylor about funding for HERA and Harris about Markel's role as co-chairman of a special mayor's task force on youth crime and vandalism.

Markel told us the city is trying to get some state matching funds for some type of crisis intervention program, but that Human Services Department Director Jeanne Bass "is going in the direction of setting up a comprehensive hotline. As far as Bass is concerned, that's where the funds will go."

On the issue of increasing police protection, Markel remains about the only councilor still supporting Dimauro's \$90,000 proposal for mounted police patrols. He admits that hiring more cops to walk beats would be a better solution, but the city just doesn't have the funds to do that.

"Right now we're 27 men short," Markel pointed out. "Even assuming we could get up to our full complement, it still wouldn't be enough to accomplish all we'd like. We'd have to hire 100 additional cops. The mounted patrol is the best we can do at this point. They did a survey in Boston and found in those neighborhoods where mounted patrols were put in there was an average 17 percent drop in the crime rate compared to those without mounted patrols."

On the state level, there is no funding set aside for rape programs. There has been some money coming through for services to battered women, but in Springfield nearly all of that has been funneled into the Hampden County Women's Center. A spokeswoman at the center admitted, however, that it does no rape counseling.

"We refer rape cases to HERA," she told us.

While not much is being done on the state level to provide rape counseling and hotline services, at least some progress is being made on the issue of increasing the conviction rate in rape cases. A bill introduced by State Sen. Alan Sisitsky (D-Spr.), setting up different categories of rape to make prosecution easier, passed the Senate June 6.

Sisitsky's legislation divides sexual offenses into four categories ranging from aggravated rape (where the victim is physically injured, where a group of rapists are involved, etc.) to a lesser offense of indecent assault and battery (where there are no injuries and actual rape does not occur). This sort of system is followed in dozens of other states, and gives juries the opportunity to take extenuating circumstances into account, thus increasing the likelihood of conviction. Under current state law, all sexual offenses carry the same heavy penalties.

The bill, which must now be acted upon by the House, also establishes funding for victim compensation. Medical, counseling, emergency housing, pregnancy and termination of pregnancy expenses would all be covered.

No Federal Money

As for the feds, they offer no more funding for rape counseling and hotlines than does the state. In fact, right now there is absolutely no federal money specifically targeted for the problem. A bill introduced by Sen. Charles Mathias (R-Md.) would remedy that situation by providing funding for grass roots organizations. Covered under the legislation would be rape hotlines, victim counseling services, transportation costs for victims and service providers and community education.

Grim Statistics

When the staff at HERA describe sexual abuse of women as the fastest growing crime in the country and insist the situation has reached a crisis level, they are not talking through their hats. A survey conducted by Western New England College undergraduate Jean Murray with the co-operation of HERA indicates that nearly one of every three women in the Springfield metropolitan area thinks she has been forced to take part in sexual activities against her will.

The report, released last month, found that 148 of the 487 women who answered the questionnaire had been sexually abused. Of those 148, 63 percent had submitted to sex under the threat of physical abuse and 71 percent felt they were "verbally forced or bribed." A full 30 percent had submitted under the direct threat of a weapon.

Murray found a number of widely-believed stereotypes about rape to be wholly unsubstantiated.

"The widely held belief that rape only takes place in dark alleys involving strangers is clearly proven false by this study."

In fact, only 32 of the 148 women who had been forced to engage in sex had been abused by a stranger. More than 55 percent of them were victims of a husband, lover, relative or friend.

The report also supports FBI estimates that only one rape in 10 is reported to the police. Only 17 of the 148 sexually abused women reported the crime to the authorities. Nearly half of them responded to the question, "What did you do about what happened?" with the answer, "Nothing." All told, only 67 of them even talked about the incident with anyone other than a friend or relative.