



**SANTA BARBARA RAPE CRISIS CENTER
CENTRO CONTRA LA VIOLACION SEXUAL**

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KATRINA & RECOVERY: STORIES EMERGE OF RAPES IN POST-KATRINA CHAOS

By John Burnett, NPR, December 21, 2005

Law-enforcement authorities dismissed early reports of widespread rapes in New Orleans during the lawless days following Hurricane Katrina. But a growing body of evidence suggests there were more storm-related sexual assaults than previously known. Female victims, now displaced from New Orleans, are slowly coming forward with a different story than the official one. Two national crime-victims' groups have reported a spike in the number of reported rapes that happened to storm evacuees. The numbers are not dramatic, but they are significant when seen in light of the official number of post-Katrina rapes and attempted rapes: four.

Judy Benitez is executive director of the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, a statewide coalition of rape crisis centers. She says as she watched New Orleans descend into chaos after Katrina, she knew what would happen. "What you had was a situation where you've got a tremendous number of vulnerable people, and then some predatory people who had all of the reasons to take their anger out on someone else," Benitez says. "Drug and alcohol use is another contributing factor, and no police presence to prevent them from doing whatever they wanted to, to whomever they wanted to."

Concerned over unreported and underreported rapes, her organization, together with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center -- which is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -- created a national database to track sexual assaults that happened after Katrina. In the six weeks since the Web site has been up, with almost no publicity, it has received 42 reports of sexual assaults. A spokesperson with the Resource Center said the number is steadily growing. Already, these preliminary cases show a high number of gang rapes and rapes by strangers, both unusual characteristics. The 42 reports include assaults that happened inside New Orleans and outside the city, for instance, in host homes. Another group, Witness Justice, a Maryland-based non-profit that assists victims of violent crimes, claims to have received 156 reports of post-Katrina violent crimes; about a third of those involved sexual assaults.

One of the victims is Ms. Lewis, a 46-year-old home health-care worker from New Orleans East, who asked that her first name not be used. She sits on the edge of a bed in a dingy, dimly lit room in a motel in Baton Rouge. Lewis says she was raped on Monday, Aug. 29, the day of the storm. The account of her rape was verified by a trained forensic nurse at Earl K. Long Hospital in Baton Rouge, where Lewis sought treatment. Lewis and others had taken refuge in the Redemption Elderly Apartments, in the Irish Channel section of New Orleans. On that first night after the storm, the city had lost power, and she was sleeping in a dark hallway, trying to catch a breeze. It was there, she says, that an unknown man with a handgun sexually assaulted her. She insists other women were raped in the same apartment building over the next four nights, but her claim could not be checked out.

"Some bad things happened, you know. There was nobody there to protect you," Lewis says. Recalling her attack, she sobs, "They just left us to die. Nobody cared." After her rape, Lewis says, there were no clinics open, so she washed herself with bleach. "All I could do was pray, pray for rescue, pray that I

didn't have any type of transmitted disease," she says. Lewis says that later in the week, national guardsmen forced evacuees out of the building at gunpoint. They were finally able to leave the city on Saturday. She says she tried to report the assault at the time, but authorities weren't listening. "The police was stressed out themselves," Lewis says. "They didn't have no food. They didn't have water. They didn't have communication. They didn't have ammunition. The National Guards didn't want to hear it." Experts say it was the perfect environment to commit a crime, and the worst environment to report a crime. The police department -- reeling from desertions, flooding and the immensity of the disaster -- was in a survival mode itself. Civil order had completely broken down.

Anastasia is a petite, 25-year-old hairdresser who asked that her last name be omitted. She contacted the New Orleans police in October and filed a report that she was beaten with a bat and raped on Sept. 6th in broad daylight next to a flooded McDonald's at Gentilly Boulevard and Elysian Fields, near her father's house. Anastasia says thugs were still wandering the streets of her neighborhood more than a week after the flood. "I didn't see any police officers -- I could have gotten away with murder," she says. "It was that terrible. So I can assume what the criminals were thinking, and that's exactly what happened."

Under the best of circumstances, rape is one of the hardest crimes to solve. In New Orleans last year, there was a rape every other day on average. National surveys show that half of all sexual assaults are never reported. Judy Benitez, of the Louisiana rape crisis group, says the non-report rate would be far higher given the nightmare of Katrina. "The fact that something wasn't reported to the police doesn't mean it didn't happen," Benitez says. "We know about all the other things that happened, all the thefts, all the robberies. There was all kinds of crime taking place on a much higher level than usual. Why would we think there was less rape typical of any given week in the city? It doesn't make any sense."

Benitez and others interviewed for this report believe that police authorities -- who were anxious to discount initially exaggerated reports of mayhem -- are downplaying violent crimes that happened in the anarchy after the storm. Lt. Dave Benelli, commander of the sex crimes unit with the New Orleans Police Department, denies that. "We're not downsizing anything," Benelli says. "I'm telling you the number of reported rapes we had." Benelli says his team investigated two attempted rapes inside the Superdome, and two additional reports of rapes that happened in the city, one of which was the 25-year-old hairdresser.

When presented with the additional cases collected by victims' advocates groups, Benelli acknowledges that the police simply don't know the extent of sex crimes after the storm. "I admit that rapes are underreported," Benelli says. "I know more sexual assaults took place. I've expressed many times that we're willing to investigate any sexual assaults that happened in this city at any time. We can only deal with what we know." The California Disaster Medical Assistance Team spent 24 hellish hours inside the Superdome. Team members said they delivered babies, treated gunshot and stab victims, and ultimately fled for their own safety. Commander Dave Lipin says they saw two women who said they'd been raped -- different women than those the police attended to. He says his team only saw a fraction of the desperate people who sought assistance. Lipin says when he arrived in Baton Rouge and turned on the TV, he was surprised by reports of rampant violence in New Orleans. "I think that that was probably over-reported," he says. "And so now I think it's swung the other direction and it's underreported. I don't know why. My sense now is there are victims out there whose stories haven't been heard."

In an effort to get victims to come forward, the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault asked Charmaine Neville, a popular New Orleans jazz singer, to tape a public service announcement for national airplay. The spot urges victims to report their assault by calling 1-800-656-HOPE. Neville says she was sexually assaulted early the morning of Aug. 31st, while she was sleeping on the roof of Drew Elementary School in the Bywater Neighborhood, where she and others had taken refuge. She made a report to a local sheriff's office; it has not yet passed the report on to the New Orleans police. Meanwhile, Lewis, the 46-year-old home health-care worker, has still not reported her assault to the police, and she has no plans to. Believing the authorities abandoned her after the storm, she wonders why they would care about her now.

PELOSI STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT BEING SIGNED INTO LAW

Washington, D.C. - House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi released the following statement on the Violence Against Women Act on January 5th, the day President Bush signed it into law:

”The passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was one of the few victories for women and families last year and I am pleased that it was signed into law today. Since it was first enacted in 1994, VAWA has been critical in protecting women from domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. It has strengthened communities and saved lives across the country. This bipartisan extension of the Act includes much-needed provisions for early intervention, prevention and health care. It is a critical step and a national commitment to keep women and children safe from fear and abuse. We can and must do more to intervene and prevent violence before it starts and harms generations of families and communities. "I commend my colleagues who were instrumental in the passage of this essential legislation, Congresswomen Hilda Solis, Co-Chair of the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues, Zoe Lofgren, and Lois Capps.”

CALCASA LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Tax Check-Off: AB 190 initiates a tax check-off program to create the California Sexual Violence Victim Services Fund, supporting California rape crisis centers and CALCASA. Californians can donate funds via a "tax check-off" option on California State Tax Return forms. The tax check-off is available for a period of five years. However, beginning in its second year of implementation, the fund must meet an annual threshold of \$250,000 of collected dollars. If the fund fails to collect a minimum of \$250,000 during any tax year other than its first year, the tax check-off will be removed from California tax forms. Initially, the California Sexual Violence Victim Services Fund check-off opportunity was slated to appear on tax forms beginning in 2007. However, CALCASA has been notified that the check-off opportunity will instead appear on tax forms beginning in 2006. Therefore, there is now a short timeline to promote the tax check-off option before the April 15, 2006 tax deadline. It will take a concerted effort of CALCASA and rape crisis centers to market this funding opportunity.

AB 1088 Campus Education Requirements: CALCASA has received many inquiries about AB 1088, which requires California colleges and universities to provide educational and preventive information about sexual violence to all incoming students beginning in January 2006. All college and university campuses must comply with this legislation. The legislation adds Sec. 67385.7 to the Education Code, stating that campuses must provide, "as part of campus orientations, educational and preventive information about sexual violence to students." Also, each campus of California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California is required to post sexual violence prevention and education information on its campus website. Orientation and website postings must include availability and contact information for campus and community resources for students who are victims of sexual violence.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

FEBRUARY ADVOCATE MEETING: FEBRUARY 13, 2006: 6-8 PM

This month's meeting will be on February 13, 2006 from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. This month's topic will cover *Somatic Therapy*. This therapeutic technique will be presented by Mary Renaud who is an MFT intern and a part of our Long-Term Collective. During the meeting, Yesenia will also distribute in-service possibilities toward the four self-study hours. Please call or e-mail Yesenia if you will be attending.

SBRCC HAS HIRED A NEW OFFICE MANAGER!

Penni Louise joined our staff as Office Manager on January 30, 2006. Penni comes to SBRCC with extensive office management skills. She gained much of her experience in Australia where she was responsible for hiring, training and supervision of staff. Her most recent employer gave her the opportunity to further her clerical, receptionist skills. She brings computer savy in MS Office and database software. Her interests are writing, feminism, theater, surfing, Kundalini Yoga, camping, open fires and horseback riding. Please join us in welcoming Penni as she assumes Office Manager duties, including some tasks related to our impending relocation.

OFFICE CLOSURE

SBRCC's office will be closed on Monday, February 20th in observance of President's Day. Of course, the 24-hour hotline will still be operational throughout the holiday.



Happy Birthday to:



- Heena P. on January 1st (*Happy Belated Birthday!*)
- Kimiko K. on February 18th
- Efrain M. on February 19th
- Laura P. on February 24th
- Diane D. on February 25th
- Yaneth C. on February 25th
- Juan A. on February 27th

MANDATORY TRAINING: LATINA SURVIVORS

The Human Relations Training (HRT) for 2006 will focus on Latina Survivors, and this training is just around the corner! This is a MANDATORY training for all Advocates, and counts towards the 12 hours needed to maintain certification as a Sexual Assault Counselor each year.

The HRT will be offered twice, and Advocates need only attend one. The dates to choose from are:

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5

OR

THURSDAY, APRIL 13

both from 6:00-8:00 p.m.

Location TBA.

This training will be conducted entirely in Spanish, with English interpretation provided through headsets. Because we have a limited number of headsets available, all Advocates who do not speak or understand Spanish must RSVP to Heather regarding which training night you will attend. Please keep in mind that if you attend a training to which you did not RSVP, there may not be enough headsets left over for you. Anyone who is bilingual in English and Spanish will be asked to forgo the use of headsets in order to make sure that all English-speaking Advocates can use them.

Please note that the HRT will take the place of the April Advocate Meeting.

Return the bottom portion of this form to RSVP for the HRT night you will attend. Send it via postal mail to 111 N. Milpas St. Santa Barbara, CA 93103, email to heather@sbrcc.net, or drop it off at SBRCC in person. You can also call Heather at 805.963.6832 x28 to RSVP by phone.



My name is _____, and I will attend the 2006 Human Relations Training about Latina Survivors on the following date (check one):

_____ Wednesday, April 5, 2006 6:00-8:00 p.m.

OR

_____ Thursday, April 13, 2006 6:00-8:00 p.m.