

County leaders gather to launch program to respond to sex assaults

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re students at festival

In addition, there will be musicians playing in small groups in other areas of the store grounds. The Sharpe Store Music Festival will be held at the store which is located at the corner of Reno Sharpe Store Road and Pittsboro-Goldston Road. For more information, contact their website at www.sharpestoremusic.org.

Admission Saturday for the festival will be \$5 per person with children 15 and under admitted free.



COUNTY KICKS OFF SEXUAL ASSAULT RESPONSE TEAM...

Elizabeth Nieves (standing at left), SART Coordinator, speaks to Chatham County leaders about the new Sexual Assault Response Team.

County leaders gather to launch program to respond to sex assaults

On Monday, April 26, Family Violence and Rape Crisis Services (FVRC) met with county leaders to launch Chatham County's SART at Chatham Hospital.

SART stands for Sexual Assault Response Team. These teams are specialized to fit the needs of their community, with the goal of countering the experience of sexual trauma with a sensitive and competent response, while increasing reporting and conviction of sexual assaults.

"I'm here today because a sexual assault happens every two minutes in our country," said Elizabeth Nieves, SART Coordinator with FVRC. "And only 2 percent of assaults will ever be held accountable for their crime."

Nieves said the use of a coordinated, community approach to the investigation and prosecution of sexual crimes helps to ensure the integrity and quality of evidence, which directly increases the likelihood that the assault can be successfully prosecuted.

"We've seen the effectiveness of coming together in a coordinated community response model to combat domestic violence - we have excellent training, good policies, and even funded positions in all law enforcement agencies," said Kathy Hodges, FVRC Co-Executive Director. "It's time to create the same forum to combat sexual assault, and we've got the right people at the table."

Nieves said a SART also promotes collaboration among law enforcement, prosecutors, medical personnel, social services and victim advocates. Their work is to assure that victims have and will seek the broad range of necessary care and services.

"It is important for sexual assault victims to feel that the agencies serving them, including the police, are on the same page," said Lieutenant Lesia McCollough of the Pittsboro Police Department. "We can accomplish that unity of voice

and effort with a Chatham County SART."

In 1997, FVRC brought together the District Attorney's Office, law enforcement officers from Siler City Police Department, Pittsboro Police Department and Chatham County Sheriff's Department to create the Criminal Justice Task Force to focus on the issue of domestic violence and develop an effective system of response. In 2003, the task force was expanded to include sexual assault issues. Instituting a SART is the next step in an ongoing effort to increase response to sexual assault crimes and to increase reporting of these crimes.

The Criminal Justice Taskforce of the Coalition for Family Peace has had great successes in creating protocol for domestic violence intervention," said Lieutenant Brad Johnson of the Chatham County Sheriff's Department

and member of the Taskforce. "I hope that this SART will bring the same progress in sexual assault cases, from increasing the number of cases reported to increasing arrests."

Nieves stated that in a two year period approximately 230 sexual assault cases were reported to FVRC while only about 50 were reported to police. Though some of those cases reported to FVRC likely happened outside the two year time frame, FVRC still only hears from a small percentage of victims.

At its next meeting the Chatham County SART will determine the county's objec-

tives for the team, with the main goals of increasing sexual assault intervention and reporting, and improving collaboration among service agencies, law enforcement, health care providers and the legal system.

"This will be another tool we can use to fight sexual assault," said Siler City Police Chief Gary Tyson. "And the more tools we have, the better we can serve our community."

For more information or to participate in SART, contact Elizabeth Nieves at 919-742-7320 or by e-mail at info@fvrc.org.