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Summit County Prosecutor Launches “Start By Believing” Victim Awareness Campaign

AKRON, Ohio (Wednesday, April 3, 2019) – Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh announced today an enhanced approach to supporting crime victims, specifically survivors of sexual assault. Start By Believing is a public awareness campaign launched by End Violence Against Women International. It was created to end the cycle of silence and change the way society responds to sexual assault.

“In my nearly 20 years as Summit County Prosecutor, I have found many survivors of sexual violence are reluctant to come forward. Many confide in family and friends. This program helps build a foundation of belief and support, rather than doubt, shame, or blame,” said Prosecutor Walsh. “If sexual assault survivors do not come forward, then the offender remains free to potentially assault additional victims. As Summit County Prosecutor, my mission is to keep the community safe and fight for victims. Start By Believing does that.”

As part of today’s announcement, members of the community voiced their support for survivors of sexual assault, including Akron Police Major Jesse Leeser, Victim Assistance Program CEO Leanne Graham, and Terri Heckman, CEO of the Rape Crisis Center of Summit and Medina Counties.

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“The Akron Police Department endorses “Start By Believing” as a way to encourage and support sexual assault survivors. Akron Police officers begin every case with an open mind and conduct a complete investigation,” said Akron Police Chief Kenneth Ball. “This simply offers a loud affirmation to victims that they will benefit from a thorough, evidence-based investigation.”

“We need to support victims and survivors of sexual violence. Start By Believing provides the foundation to do just that,” said Leanne Graham, CEO of Victim Assistance Program of Summit County. “I have met countless survivors who hesitated reporting what happened because they feared not being believed. Start By Believing offers a positive response when a survivor of sexual assault comes forward.”

“The Rape Crisis Center works every day to support and assist survivors of sexual assault. We must end the cycle of silence which surrounds many sexual assault survivors,” said Terri Heckman, CEO of the Rape Crisis Center of Summit and Medina Counties. “My hope is Start By Believing changes attitudes toward sexual assault and survivors of sexual violence.”

The first Wednesday of April is National Start By Believing day. It precedes National Crime Victims’ Rights Week, which is April 7th through April 13th, and is sponsored by the Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime. April is also Sexual Assault Awareness Month. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, Sexual Assault Awareness Month is a campaign to raise public awareness about sexual violence and educate communities on how to prevent it.

As part of the Start By Believing campaign, Summit County residents will see signs on buses and billboards, as well as newspaper, and web based ads with specific messages to help support survivors of sexual assault. These signs were paid for with funds the Summit County Prosecutor’s Office obtained through a Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) grant.