



# Elliot Kolkovich

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## Summit County Prosecutor

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## PROSECUTOR KOLKOVICH, SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVOR, COMMUNITY LEADERS LAUNCH 2025 “START BY BELIEVING” CAMPAIGN



### *Turn Summit County Teal to Support Survivors of Sexual Violence*

AKRON, OH – Today, Summit County Prosecutor Elliot Kolkovich, along with a local survivor of sexual violence, and other community leaders launched the 2025 Start By Believing campaign in Summit County. The annual campaign, created by End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI), aims to change the way society responds to disclosures of sexual violence and abuse. It encourages individuals, communities, and institutions to take a supportive approach when survivors come forward. At the press conference,

Prosecutor Kolkovich, the Victim Assistance Program of Summit County, the Hope and Healing Survivor Resource Center, law enforcement and survivors all came together to speak on the impact of the campaign and the work done to protect and support survivors of sexual violence.

Start By Believing Day is always the first Wednesday in April, which is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Following later in the month comes National Crime Victims' Rights Week, which runs April 21 through April 27, and is sponsored by the Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime. Sexual Assault Awareness Month aims to empower survivors, educate the public, and encourage communities to take action in supporting victims of sexual violence and other crimes.

Prosecutor Kolkovich encourages residents to support and believe victims of crime and avoid asking questions like, "why were you in that part of town?" or "what were you wearing?" or "why did you do that?" Questions like these contribute to victim-blaming culture, implying that the survivor caused or even deserved what happened to them.

**"Experiencing a crime is already a traumatic event, but many people overlook the anxiety survivors face when coming forward. In many cases, the perpetrator is someone they know or trust, making it even harder to speak out. Survivors often fear they won't be believed, that their experiences will be minimized, or that seeking justice will only bring more pain,"** said Prosecutor Kolkovich. **"When we shift our focus from skepticism to understanding, we not only empower survivors but also encourage more people to report crimes, ultimately making our communities safer."**

The survivor who shared her story during the press conference said: **"If someone discloses sexual abuse, we say 'I believe you.' We say 'I'm sorry that happened to you,' 'This was not your fault.' We don't have to have details. We show we believe them by letting them speak and helping them feel safe. Being believed is the first step to begin healing for a survivor."**

**"As the Start By Believing website says, three little words can truly make a difference. Start By Believing is essential to public safety and is something we can all do. It takes little effort and costs nothing. Sexual Violence is an issue that impacts us all and is one of the most dangerous crimes in our community. Public safety is a shared responsibility and this is one step anyone can take to make our community safer,"** said Lieutenant Keith Heilmeier, Akron Children's Hospital Division of Police.

**"Victim Assistance Program is honored to stand with Summit County Prosecutor's Office and our community on Start by Believing Day, reaffirming our unwavering commitment to empowering survivors of sexual violence as they navigate the path from hardship to healing. This day serves as a powerful reminder that through intentional collaboration and increased awareness, we can break the cycle of silence and ensure survivors receive the compassion, respect, and support they deserve,"** said Becky Cool, MSW, LSW, Director of Services, Victim Assistance Program of Summit County.

**"When survivors are believed, they are more likely to seek help, pursue justice, and begin the path toward healing. When we believe survivors, we begin to chip away at a culture of silence and shame—and build a community grounded in empathy, justice, and change,"** said Teresa Stafford-Wright, Chief Executive Officer, Hope and Healing Survivor Resource Center.

Summit County Council Vice President Erin Dickinson also read a proclamation that the council passed recognizing the first Wednesday in April as Start By Believing Day, and supporting the Start By Believing Campaign as locally organized by the Summit County Prosecutor's Office.

To further promote the Start By Believing Campaign, the Summit County Prosecutor's Office has sponsored billboards across Summit County encouraging community members to "Start By Believing," and providing Hope and Healing's 24-hour resource hotline for survivors. Many local communities, organizations, and

businesses are also coming together to “[Turn Summit County Teal](#)”, including Akron Children’s Hospital, the University of Akron, Summit County Victim Assistance Program, Summit County Clerk of Courts Tavia Galonski, the City of Twinsburg, and Consolidus. [Teal](#) is the color used during Sexual Assault Awareness Month to spread awareness, and many locations and buildings around Summit County will be lit up by teal-colored lights.

City of Twinsburg Mayor Sam Scaffide also joined the Summit County Prosecutor’s Office in [Turning Summit County Teal](#): **“This is the second year the City of Twinsburg has taken part in the Turn Summit Teal initiative, and we’re proud to stand alongside the Summit County Prosecutor’s Office in raising awareness for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Sexual assault continues to be one of the most underreported crimes, and our message to survivors is clear: if you come forward, you will be heard, believed, and supported. We thank Prosecutor Kolkovich and his team for continuing to lead this vital effort.”**

Sexual violence survivors often face disbelief – and even blame – when they come forward, which is why End Violence Against Women International developed the “Start by Believing” campaign. In Summit County, the local campaign was initially launched in 2019 by former Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh. Prosecutor Kolkovich honors both the campaign and her legacy by continuing this important initiative to support crime victims.

If you or someone you know is a survivor of sexual violence, there are resources available. The 24-hour Hope and Healing Survivor Resource Hotline is (330) 374-1111. The Victim Assistance Program 24-hour hotline is (330) 376-0040.







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