

Bill H.2998: An Act Creating a Sexual Assault Climate Survey for Massachusetts Colleges and Universities

Sexual Assault on College Campuses: The “Silent Epidemic”

- National studies estimate that **one in four college women and one in sixteen college men will be the victims of an attempted or completed rape during their years at college** and more than one-third of women at colleges will experience sexual harassment.¹
- Studies conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics have shown that **less than ten percent report their rape** to outside authorities.² As a result of underreporting, **the American Medical Association has described sexual assault as the “silent epidemic”** that impacts millions of Americans yet is all too often hidden in the shadows or brushed under the rug.
- While the Clery Act requires colleges to disclose information about different types of crime on or near their campuses, including sexual assault, low report rates means that official statistics understate the scope of the problem. **Due to widespread underreporting, present-day policy makers lack the data they need to design effective policy responses.**
- In the absence of accurate campus-specific statistics, it is almost impossible for colleges and universities to identify where and when problems are arising and to determine how best to address these problems. Indeed, **the CDC’s guidelines for sexual assault prevention acknowledge that “little is known about what works to prevent sexual violence.”**³

Proposals for a “Climate Survey”

- The need for accurate information is one of the reasons why many sexual assault advocacy groups have proposed implementing a “climate survey,” or an anonymous student survey to evaluate the prevalence and perception of sexual assault on college campuses.
- **According to the 2014 White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, “the first step in solving a problem is to name it and know the extent of it – and a campus climate survey is the best way to do that.”**⁴
- In 2015, Senators Claire McCaskill and Kirstin Gillibrand also proposed a national sexual assault climate survey as part of their comprehensive sexual assault prevention bill, the Campus Accountability and Safety Act (CASA). However, Congress has failed to take action on CASA, and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has discontinued the Obama administration’s policy of advocating for climate surveys under Title IX.

Introducing a Climate Survey in Massachusetts

- **In the absence of action on the federal level, it has fallen to the state to step up and take the lead on fighting the sexual assault epidemic** and keeping our students safe.
- In the fall of 2014, Senator Will Brownsberger worked with students in Massachusetts to identify the best ways to move forward in addressing sexual assault on college campuses. The result of this collaboration was

¹ Krebs, C. P., Lindquist, C., Warner, T., Fisher, B., & Martin, S. (2007). “The campus sexual assault (CSA) study.”

² Fisher, B., Cullen, F. & Turner, M. (2000). “The Sexual Victimization of College Women.”

³ CDC (2014). “Preventing Intimate Partner & Sexual Violence: Program Activities Guide.”

⁴ “Not Alone: The First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault.” (2014).

Senate Bill S.650, which was favorably reported out by the Joint Committee on Higher Education before passing the Senate without opposition.

- This winter, **Representative Lori Ehrlich has stepped up to continue the fight**, joining with 20 co-sponsors to put forward House Bill H.2998, “An Act Creating a Sexual Assault Climate Survey for Massachusetts Colleges and Universities.”
- **House Bill H.2998 will bring together experts on sexual assault in consultation with students, survivors, advocacy groups, and colleges and universities to develop a sexual assault climate survey for Massachusetts** based on best practices from peer-reviewed research measuring sexual violence and harassment. **By law, the survey will be completely anonymous**, and no personally identifiable information would be collected.
- **The survey will gather information annually about the incidence of sexual assault, students’ knowledge of institutional policies and procedures, reporting practices, contextual factors such as the use of alcohol and drugs, and demographic factors that could be used to identify at-risk groups**
- After the surveys have been administered, the task force will analyze the sexual assault incident data and publish a report based on the data, their deliberations, and any hearings they may conduct.

The Benefits of a Sexual Assault Climate Survey

- A climate survey offers many benefits, which is why a **climate survey has been proposed by groups from the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault to the Association of American Universities (AAU) to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN).**
- **In its June 2016 report on best practices for sexual assault and violence prevention, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education recommended annual campus climate surveys for Massachusetts colleges and universities**, writing that “it is imperative that each institution directly query their students about their perceptions of and experiences with sexual violence.”
- Collecting comprehensive data on sexual assault will ensure transparency and raise awareness.
- **More detailed data on sexual assault rates will allow colleges and universities to identify at-risk demographics, tailor solutions to the unique circumstances of their campus communities, and test the effectiveness of sexual assault prevention programs.**
- Moreover, as the Senate McCaskill-Gillibrand bill shows, a sexual assault climate survey can complement other policies to combat sexual assault by providing a measure to test whether our policies are working.
- **In order to combat sexual assault on college campuses, we must first shed more light on this complex problem. We need to learn more about the prevalence of sexual assault, and we also need to learn more about the root causes of sexual assault so we can take steps to address these causes.**
- As we continue to work to keep our students safe by preventing sexual assault on college campuses, it is crucial that students themselves have a systematic way to share their experiences, participate in the dialogue, and make their voices heard.
- **Here in Massachusetts, we have the opportunity to become national leaders in the effort to combat sexual assault** by implementing climate surveys at our colleges and universities and making the results publicly available.

The Every Voice Coalition: Who We Are

- We are a student-led coalition including students, survivors, advocates, and experts who believe that a campus climate survey is the first step toward making our campuses safe for all students
- In 2015, we testified before the Joint Higher Education Committee with support from more than 17 different campuses. **Today, almost 4,000 students have signed on in support of a sexual assault campus climate survey. Students across Massachusetts agree: every voice should be heard.**

For more information about this legislation, please email us at everyvoicema@gmail.com, or give us a call at (617) 455-5709.