

June 2017:

*The following Message from the Director originally appeared as a Guest Column in Lehigh Valley Live and can be found by clicking [here](#).*

Sexual violence is a widespread and serious issue that impacts men, women, children and communities everywhere, including the Lehigh Valley. High-profile sexual assault cases like the Bill Cosby trial provide the opportunity to educate the community about the realities of sexual violence and dispel the myths that normalize the behavior of offenders.

Attendees release balloons during a vigil held by the Crime Victims Council of the Lehigh Valley in Allentown. The Crime Victims Council of the Lehigh Valley has been serving victims of sexual violence for the past 44 years. During this time we have seen that every victim responds differently. There is no one right way to act after being raped. Typical reactions to sexual assault do not typically align with how the public expects victims to behave. It is not what is commonly shown on television or in the movies.

The reality is that most victims do not make an official report to law enforcement. Many victims wait weeks, months or even years before talking about the assault to anyone, if ever. If a victim does report, delayed reporting is normal.

The court system is not necessarily the path to healing for everyone. Going through the criminal justice system is a very personal choice for victims to make. It places a spotlight on the assault and doesn't guarantee an outcome. It removes the victims lack of privacy and leaves them open to being judged by others.

When victims do disclose, it is often a process and typically not all at once. This is a common occurrence following traumatic events, not just sexual violence. Many victims also experience disbelief, especially if the offender is someone they know.

Most victims know the perpetrator. Last year, that was true for 88 percent of the sexual violence victims we served. This makes it even more confusing. It is so hard to believe that someone you trusted or had a relationship with betrayed that trust. When added to the anxiety of not being believed, concern of retaliation, worries of their social circle being disrupted and fear of loss of privacy, it becomes clearer to see all that victims are dealing with when deciding to disclose.

People always ask what can be done to stop this devastating crime. Each one of us has a role to play in ending sexual violence. Part of ending sexual violence is holding perpetrators accountable. To do this we need to support and believe victims so they feel safe when reporting. If we want more victims to report, we must all do our part to be an educated public and informed jury pool.

Crime Victims Council is always available to help, 24-hours a day at 610-437-6611, no matter when the assault occurred or whether a victim wants to report or not. All services are confidential and offered at no cost.