uSafeNH: Putting resources in the hands of victims

BY GRACE MATTEN

Where do victims of sexual assault on campus turn for help? A friend or professor? Campus security or health services? A roommate?

Too often the answer is no one. Students assaulted on campus are more likely to drop a class or move to another residence hall than to seek counseling, medical help, or a criminal justice or campus disciplinary response. And yet we know that students who disclose a rape and are supported do much better than those who don’t, or those who get negative reactions when they tell someone they’ve been raped.

At least one reason campus sexual assault victims don’t ask for help is the confusing process of finding the help they need. What services are available on campus? What are their reporting options? Who else will find out about the assault? Simply, what’s next?

uSafeNH is changing that in New Hampshire. Developed by a collaborative team led by the Prevention Innovations Research Center (PIRC) at the University of New Hampshire, the uSafeNH app makes campus-specific resources and information available on students’ phones. The easy accessibility made possible with a phone app is important, because the sooner victims know about resources and supports after an assault, the more likely they are to use them.

Click on the app and there is a description of options for victims from reporting to police to finding ongoing support. “Helpful Answers” has trauma-informed replies to common questions like “Was I assaulted?” or “How do I help my friend?” uSafeNH also has a complete list of campus and community resources, tailored for each college or university. Campus-based resources include health services, counseling centers, Title IX coordinators, campus safety or police, and the campus sexual assault policy. Local resources include 24-hour crisis center hotlines, hospitals, and police departments.

uSafeNH also has a built-in safety feature called “Expect Me.” A student can enter the phone number of a friend or roommate to be called automatically if the student doesn’t check back in as safe within a set amount of time.

The app was developed through a collaborative process including PIRC researchers and students and representatives from the NH Attorney General’s Office, the NH Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, the NH SART Project, and the NH Violence Against Women Campus Consortium.

Focus groups were conducted on seven campuses with 200 students to provide guidance in creating the app. PIRC incorporated feedback from students on rural and urban campuses who were enrolled in community colleges, four-year undergraduate institutions, and law and graduate students statewide. Every aspect of the app was discussed, including the name, color scheme, text font and size, readability, resources provided, frequently asked questions, and interactive features.
PIRC launched uSafeNH on 22 college and university campuses in New Hampshire last year. The app is available to download for free from the iOS App Store or Google Play on Android phones.

In order to continually improve uSafeNH, data generated using in-app software and qualitative feedback from focus groups and individual interviews is being used to evaluate the app. Holding focus groups with students is also part of the ongoing evaluation. This spring PIRC will conduct individual interviews with victims of campus sexual assault to better understand what barriers to recovery they face and how they use resources.

Now PIRC is preparing to take the app to the national level with the release of uSafeUS. As an initial step, information about the app will be distributed to campuses and state sexual violence coalitions across the Eastern Seaboard. If a college or university chooses to adopt the app, an upfront fee will cover PIRC’s costs of customizing the app for that institution. PIRC will also provide ongoing support to be sure the campus can update resources, information, and policies as they change.

Curious and ready to see how easy it can be for victims of sexual assault to find resources? Check out uSafeNH.org — and spread the word. You may help a victim of campus sexual assault easily find exactly what they need when they need it.

**CONTACT**

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