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Blog Series: Sexual Assault Awareness Month



McNeal, Dion
Internal Communications Manager

Dear **City Staff**,



April is **Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM)**, and the Domestic and Gender Based Violence Prevention Initiative and the Cambridge Public Health Department have partnered to deliver an informative and educational blog series. If you missed our first message, you can find it [here](#). It will provide context and framing as you continue to read this blog's content. We will host a virtual event for informative discussion about SAAM on **Wednesday, April 30, at 1 p.m. via Zoom**. Please [click here to register](#) if you would like to attend.

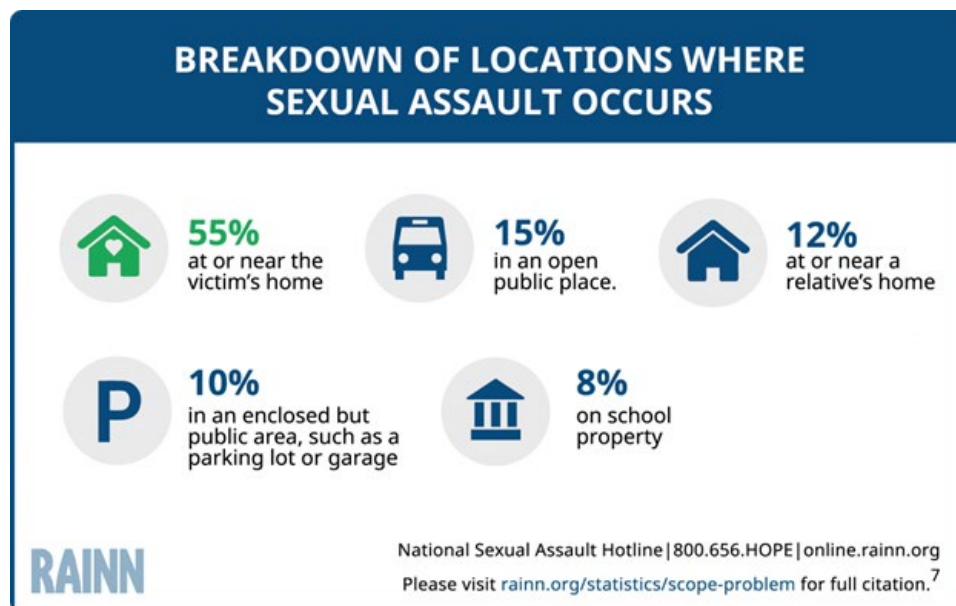
Shameka Gregory, Coordinator of the Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Prevention Initiative for the City of Cambridge and Teakia Brown, Director of Community Engagement at the Cambridge Public Health Department, are excited to continue this Blog Series with you about sexual assault and sexual violence. This week, we are exploring consent, who can be a survivor, and who can be a perpetrator of sexual violence.

***Disclaimer:** The content that we explore together may be triggering for some. We know that there are survivors among us. This blog series is not intended to and does not constitute legal advice nor is it a replacement for seeking services and support if needed. [Encouragement to Take Care of Yourself](#).*

RAPE AND ALL FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ARE NEVER A SURVIVOR'S FAULT!

What is Consent?

Consent is the ability to say yes **OR** no without fear of consequences. Fear of consequences can include fear of physical and/or emotional violence if you say no. Many forms of coercion can be used to get someone to say "yes" to a sexual act; however, **when coercion is present there can be no consent.**



Survivors Are People We All Know and Love

Survivors are present in every community where we live, work, and play, both in Cambridge and beyond. It is crucial to recognize that assault can happen anywhere. Although [women aged 18 to 34](#) have the highest rates of sexual violence committed against them, individuals of all ages, genders, religions, abilities, and backgrounds can experience sexual violation.

Sexual violence is a [public health issue](#). It is crucial to understand that **sexual violence does not simply “happen”; it is a deliberate act committed by one person against another**. Framing it this way emphasizes the need to place accountability where it belongs, on the individual who chose to assault someone.

Survivors are often labeled as “weak” and “helpless” victims, or portrayed as individuals (typically women) who make “stupid” and “unsafe” decisions. Unfortunately, many survivors are unfairly blamed for their own assaults. It is **NOT** their fault. **If you’re reading this as a survivor, we want you to hear this clearly: it is not your fault.** This common misconception can make it even harder for survivors to come to terms with their experiences of sexual assault. Many individuals may struggle with identifying as “victims” or fear how others will perceive them. Please know that you are not alone, and your feelings are valid.

Survivors are individuals who have faced violence and are either finding their way forward or actively working to do so. They can be our colleagues, supervisors, teachers, neighbors, friends, and more. These survivors are the authors of their own stories and have the power to define their own paths toward healing. In any efforts we undertake to address sexual violence, it is essential to center and listen to the voices and needs of survivors.

We Also Know Perpetrators

We know survivors of sexual violence, but we also know individuals who are perpetrators of such violence. This reality can be difficult to confront and may raise immediate feelings of denial, discomfort, or even outrage. It is challenging to accept that those around us are capable of violence. However, statistics make it clear that perpetrators of sexual violence exist within our communities, just as survivors do.

Our collective struggle to recognize and name the actions of individuals in our lives as sexual violence inhibits our ability to practice accountability in our communities. This allows perpetrators of sexual violence more chances to harm others. It contributes to the

disbelief that many survivors of sexual abuse face, and it is one of the reasons sexual violence continues to be a pervasive issue. However, **we can change this.**

In our work and in this blog series, we focus on accountability. Holding someone accountable means not ignoring their inappropriate words or actions. It involves clearly naming their behavior while expressing that you do not support it. It means that you encourage any sincere efforts to change and do not minimize their behavior. Additionally, it means taking the steps to remove their access to someone they might harm, especially when children are involved. Individual accountability requires similar actions, but these steps are taken independently.

Please note that we encourage accountability because our years in the field have taught us that it is the most viable option. Our legal and civil court processes are avenues available to survivors however, these systems often further harm survivors in the process. We will talk more about this at our live event on April 30.

Below are a few resources if you would like to learn more. Please feel free to reach out to us if you would like to talk further.

- [How to Get Help from BARCC](#)
- [How to Help A Friend](#)
- [How to Get Help from Cambridge Police](#)
- [Employee Resource Program: Leadership Toolkit](#)

In the Next Blog We'll Share More About...

How to speak to/support someone who is a survivor, how to speak to/support someone who is a survivor, and how to hold accountable conversations with someone who has hurt someone else.

Thank you for taking the time to read our blog post! We'll leave you with a thoughtful quote to ponder until next week. Take care!

"When I hear about 'community accountability', what I think people mean is that the whole community will work to hold a single person 'accountable' to a harmful action or series of actions. This model forgets that abuse thrives in silence and isolation, and that

can only occur when a community turns away from great injustice”.

Simmons, A. S. (2019). *Love WITH accountability: Digging up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse*. AK Press.

Who's Behind This Blog Series



Hi, I'm Teakia Brown [she/her], the Director of Community Engagement at the Cambridge Public Health Department. I lead **Population Health initiatives**. I have a multidisciplinary background in violence prevention, community engagement, and reproductive health care.

In past work, I have taught sex education classes, ran teen dating violence programs, and worked directly with people who have experienced violence as the Medical Advocate coordinator for the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. I am deeply committed to this topic and look forward to exploring what sexual assault means to us as City employees and how we can make a meaningful impact on the communities we serve.



Hi, I'm Shameka Gregory [she/her], Coordinator of the Domestic and Gender Based Violence Prevention Initiative for the City of Cambridge. I am a licensed independent clinical social worker who has worked in the field of domestic and gender-based violence for the last decade.

The way that I think about and approach these issues has changed tremendously in my experience time. I have learned from the wisdom and experiences of survivors as a therapist and an advocate. Those are the perspectives I bring to this conversation and what I wish to share with you. As a City and a community, we must always **center** survivors and **listen to** survivors.

Until next time

We look forward to bringing you another blog post highlighting sexual awareness month.

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