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Headline: Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault: Giving sex crime victims a voice at Capitol

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Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault: Giving sex crime victims a voice at Capitol

by Nancy Crotti
Dolan Media Newswires

ST. PAUL, MN -- Headlines about gruesome sexual assaults can sometimes spur legislators into action. But nonprofit group that aims to strengthen laws, boost education and prevention works in the trenches daily to change the way victims and perpetrators are treated.

The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA) was founded in the 1970s as an outgrowth of the Minnesota Department of Corrections. It has three faces in the Capitol: executive director Donna Dunn, contract lobbyist Bob Tracy and staff attorney Caroline Palmer.

Dunn often provides legislative testimony in an effort to raise funds for the nonprofit, which continues to perform one of its original functions, supporting 24-hour crisis centers that help victims in every Minnesota county. Often staffed by volunteers, the centers are funded "on a shoestring," Dunn says.

Tracy often sets the stage to have bills introduced on behalf of MNCASA, and then pulls Palmer into meetings with legislators to discuss what language is likely to work.

One bill that MNCASA reintroduced after it was tabled last session aimed to have those convicted of fifth-degree sexual assault, a gross misdemeanor, charged as felons if they are repeat offenders. Fifth-degree sexual assault may involve groping, forcible removal of a victim's clothing, or lewd exposure of genitals to a person younger than 16. MNCASA took up this cause after prosecutors complained to Dunn that they had encountered some of these offenders a dozen times, charged with the same crimes.

Palmer is optimistic for this bill's eventual passage after compromising with senators to disregard a first offense if it was committed while the offender was a juvenile.

MNCASA also wants to lengthen the amount of time an offender would be considered in a position of authority over a victim, such as a teacher or coach. This bill would also seek prosecution of the offender who harms the victim outside the setting where he or she is an authority figure. The organization withdrew the bill last session but plans to have a revised version introduced, Dunn said.

Palmer often testifies before legislative committees and invites prosecutors along to answer technical questions. She joined MNCASA in 2008 after working for three years at the Minnesota State Bar Association as pro bono development director, and as executive director of Legal CORPS and the Minnesota Volunteer Attorney program. She was staff attorney at the Minnesota AIDS Project from 1999 to 2004. Since 2005, she has been an adjunct professor at her alma mater, Hamline University School of Law, most recently teaching a course titled "The Anatomy of a Sexual Assault Case."

Although the law is Palmer's second career (she first worked in arts administration and has contributed articles on dance, film and performance to area publications since 1989), she has always been interested in public policy. Even while working in the arts, Palmer said she worked with artists on policy issues surrounding the National Endowment for the Arts.

She enjoys identifying issues and determining ways to fix them. Those who work with Palmer say she is a thorough researcher with an ability to elicit and present opinions from all parties involved in an issue.

"When I do hear from her, I really value it," says John Kingrey, executive director of the Minnesota County Attorneys Association. "It's what she brings to the table and the expertise that other people bring to the table through her."

Fighting perceptions

Palmer and her colleagues at MNCASA focus on getting state legislators to understand victims and the many ways sexual assault harms them and those around them — and to take an interest in prevention. Palmer said that she has learned to be patient, since changes in law and public policy surrounding the subject of sexual assault can be excruciatingly slow.

"We are up against some of the perceptions that people have about how to approach sexual violence. People are very afraid of the issue," Palmer says. "They're afraid to talk about sexuality, period. The past five years of doing this work, I think the conversations have gotten easier and people want to have the conversations."

Palmer's approach is one of the reasons those conversations with legislators have improved, according to Kaarin Long, Palmer's predecessor at MNCASA who now works as an assistant Ramsey County prosecutor.

Prosecutors tend to come on strong when speaking to legislators about sexual assault, Long explained, while Palmer has a more nuanced approach.

"I've been impressed with the wide range of things that she and that program have been doing in terms of finding an issue and then diligently finding funding to support research into the issue and then developing training for professionals," Long added. "She doesn't do

anything halfway. She diligently and fully invests in that project.”

Palmer acts as a liaison between law enforcement, victim advocates and educators through MNCASA's public policy committee, according to Erin Kuester, an assistant Goodhue County Attorney. Palmer also created a forum for prosecutors across the state to discuss issues surrounding sexual violence and a listserv for those who cannot attend meetings. During the final hectic days of a legislative session, Palmer keeps everyone up to date, Kuester said.

In addition to its legislative involvement, MNCASA runs the Sexual Violence Justice Institute. Founded in 2001, the institute works with law enforcement and others in the community to increase victims' access to resources that can help them report such crimes and ensure that the responding agencies support the victims. The institute provides training, helps form response teams, fosters communications within those teams, acts as an information clearinghouse and provides technical assistance.

The group's third and newest focus is on prevention of sexual assault against adults and children through education of parents, students and the public. MNCASA is also watching a federal class-action lawsuit by former prison inmates who have been committed to a Minnesota state hospital for being sexually dangerous or having a sexually psychopathic personality disorder. Minnesota has the highest number of such patients in the United States, Dunn said, and only one has been released in the past 20 years.

“We have no dollars to fund any research or service provision around prevention. We have a system that's really top-heavy on the harm,” Dunn says. “How do we provide for the public safety and address the social norms that get us there?”

Much of MNCASA's work came together in a 2011 Minnesota Supreme Court decision allowing expert witnesses to testify on behalf of sexual assault victims, whose behavior during and after an assault often mystifies juries, Dunn says. MNCASA trains prosecutors on how to use expert witnesses, and victim advocates and medical advisors on how to explain victim behavior. Palmer said she has hope for the future of sexual assault prevention and victim advocacy.

“This is something that affects everybody in some way, either directly or indirectly, and it's so critical for our society to come to terms with this right now,” Palmer says. “I feel that there's movement, positive movement, being made. I enjoy being part of that social movement and advocacy that I really believe in.”

The Palmer File

Name: Caroline Palmer

Job: Staff attorney, Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Age: 45

Grew up: Arlington, Va.

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