

# Nationwide Injustice for Sexual Assault Victims



**By Evie Shaye Herndon**

Did you know that every 73 seconds an American is sexually assaulted? According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 1 out of 6 women and 1 out of 33 men have been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. It is also said that annually, 433,648 people 12 or older are sexually assaulted or raped. That is not including the 18,900 military service members who experience unwanted sexual contact, the 80,000 inmates who are sexually assaulted, and the 60,000 children who experience sustained sexual abuse.

These statistics alone prove that sexual assault is not only present in America, but it is flourishing. In addition to the facts, the #metoo movement introduced in 2017 spread across the nation when women broke the silence and spoke out about their abuse revealing a monstrosity of sexual harassment and misconduct in America. The spread only continues today.

At this point, it is safe to say the issue of sexual assault has been exposed in America and people everywhere are learning to be more outspoken about their past or present experiences. However, with the information on full display there are still gaps in the legal system that have yet to take priority. The overwhelming abuse many Americans face every day is being overlooked and victims are left to fend for themselves.

Now, I want to give a disclaimer. I am not talking about feminism in this article. I am not talking about the overwhelming issue of men in power with sexual assault allegations. I am not talking about taking away your freedom of speech or any of your rights. I am not going to touch on these things because I need you to hear me. This is not a topic that should be up for political debate. This is simply about the facts and the issues assault victims everywhere are enduring.

What if I told you there are sexual assault victims in the United States who must drive hours to a hospital across town immediately after being violated so they can undergo a Sexual Assault Forensics Exam.

That would shock you, right? You would wonder why they would not just go to the nearest OBGYN or normal doctor? If you are having these questions you are not alone, but sadly there is no mistake in the facts here.

In fact, this is the exact story of a young woman from Chicago who drove 12 hours, stopping at several hospitals along the way, before finding a hospital with a SANE to perform a Sexual Assault Forensics Exam in Milwaukee. That is nearly 90 miles that she had to drive without medical attention just to get the proper care she needed after being victim to a heinous crime.

If you do not know what a SANE is, let me explain. A SANE is a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner. They are the only medical professionals trained and certified to inspect assault victims and there is currently a major SANE shortage in the nation. This has made it very difficult for victims to get the important care they need after an assault and currently, not much is being done about it.

There is very little focus in government on this issue. However, one of the few people in office trying to fix the issue is Virginia Congressman, Morgan Griffith.

Congressman Griffith proposed national legislation in 2019 to create a nationwide standard for the trained nurse examiners. The bill that has been repeatedly proposed, since 2019, would require the Department of Health and Human Services to "establish a task force to improve forensic evidence collection related to sexual assault, maintain a website with resources and best practices related to the treatment of individuals for sexual assault, and host an annual meeting to address gaps in health care relating to sexual assault," said Griffith.

Congressman Griffith stated, "We have to do better for sexual assault victims, and the Sexual Assault Victims Protection Act would help. It is a commonsense bill that would help bring to justice perpetrators of sexual assault and alleviate some of the trauma caused by that crime."

This bill seems like a given. Congressman Griffith is right to call it "common sense." In fact, it is shocking and angering that this bill has yet to move forward.

"This bill originated in 2018, when then-Congressman Ted Poe and I introduced it along with some other Members of Congress. Around that time, I heard testimony in a House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing about the availability of sexual assault nurses and forensic kits," said Griffith.

Griffith shared that the bill died after being referred to the subcommittee of Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security in the 116th Congress and he plans to reintroduce the bill again for the 117th Congress, which began the beginning of this year.

The bill is simply proposed legislation to aid American citizens after being sexually assaulted with the care and the evidence they need. So why did it die in the 116th Congress?

Firstly, money is a prime component in this situation, as it is in almost everything. Having the financial means to train and launch several SANE's can get expensive. SANE's must undergo several hours of training with costs close to \$450 out of pocket on their own time. They do not get paid for this training because as it stands now, several states have made the program and extra certification that nurses can get on their own dime. Obviously, many nurses cannot afford the fee for training, and the unpaid time off, thus very few people are getting trained.

Griffith's legislation would push to help fund training for nurses nationwide. While I understand the expense makes things difficult, that is not an excuse for the government to turn a blind eye to the shortage in a major medical need. Our government and our healthcare is failing the American people and something must be done.

Secondly, the issue is being viewed as a criminal issue as opposed to a healthcare issue. While the assault is definitely criminal, the examination and the medical treatment an assault victim receives is not. This is not only a matter of catching "bad guys" but a matter of the state providing enough healthcare professionals to treat rape victims. An assault victim should be able to get the healthcare they need after an assault. I feel like I shouldn't have to be stating this. Truly, we are talking about a human being who needs to be taken care of at this point. Thus, the legislation should not be viewed as criminal but rather medical.

Furthermore, is it not possible that if we made healthcare professionals readily available with the training needed to comfort victims of assault that more women would come forward in the first place? Time and time again we have had assault victims come forward years after the abuse because at the time fear was the initial emotion. If we normalize speaking out and promote care for assault victims, then maybe we wouldn't have so many assault cases in limbo. This only leaves a stream of sexual assault allegations and no justice for anyone. If we normalize and speak openly about where we stand as a nation when it comes to sexual assault then maybe more people will not be afraid to seek help.

While there are a lot of moving parts to this issue, it simply must come down to taking care of the American people. It is an injustice that this bill only continues to die in Congress time and time again. I encourage our readers to stand up for issues like this because, just a Congressman Griffith stated, "we have to do better for assault victims." If we cannot provide basic medical attention to those who have been blatantly violated in our country, then where does the justice actually lie?