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## Task force tracks school barriers confronting teens

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When Angie was drugged and raped by a boy while in junior high school, she still had to face him every day. She was regularly confronted with threats and boys who told her she "deserved it."

Despite daily complaints, she got no cooperation or protection from the principal or dean at her school. The rape crisis center offered to provide training about the experience of a rape victim, but school officials refused.

Angie, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, found the situation in high school to be vastly different. The principal there worked to ensure that she was never scheduled in the same classes as her attacker and that he arrived in school after she did so they wouldn't have to meet.

"The school experience made me realize how uneducated people are about rape," she said. "That's why I choose to speak about it so that what happened to me does not happen to anyone else."

Angie is a member of the task force on Ensuring School Safety, which held its first hearing in Quincy Monday night. The group will take testimony around the state to learn about the barriers to high school graduation for teen parents and victims of sexual and domestic abuse. By early next year, it will present a report on its findings to guide the state in setting policies and procedures to break down those barriers.

Among those who spoke were representatives of the Teen Parent Services program, Quanada and the Advocacy Network for Children.

"There's some good things going on (in the Quincy area), but more needs to be done," said task force member Wendy Pollack of Chicago, director of the Women's Law and Policy Project. "School districts and school personnel have to be educated about the issues, and there has to be protocols in place that are clear so that the things that do go wrong ... can be avoided."

Among the pluses for the Quincy area is the Teen Parent Services program operated by Quincy Public Schools. It provides in-school child care and models positive parenting to help break the cycle of teen motherhood.

Among the difficulties locally is providing shelter for homeless youth under age 18 so that they feel supported enough to continue school, said Kathy Citro, TPS coordinator. Homeless teens spend their nights "couch surfing," and those with children are likely to drop out of school.

Agencies such as Quanada that provide services to victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence work well with school districts in the counties they serve, said Jerry Gille of Quanada. Problems with confidentiality between service agencies and the schools involve educating families, as well.

"There's always room for improvements," Gille said. "My recommendation would be to simply continue the dialogue (and training) and increase it when and where we can."

Clairice Hetzler, executive director of the Advocacy Network, recommended that teachers receive more training in how children disclose abuse and how to respond to it.

"What I would like to see is each school with a protocol in place," she said.

The personal testimony will provide impact to the report, said Michael Schneider, clinical psychologist and task force member. He hopes future sessions will include input from the juvenile justice system, which was not represented Monday. Much of the testimony focused on providing training for school personnel, an important part of the process and its goal of ensuring success in schools, he said.

Angie says she would not have known about the problems a rape victim faces had it not happened to her.

"I had two very different experiences with school administrators," she said. "The good experience, (they) helped me find solutions. ... (It's) what should happen in all schools."

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