

SafeHouse Center, Washtenaw County Launch Start by Believing Initiative

SafeHouse Center, Washtenaw County Bringing Together Coalition of Health Care, Safety Professionals for Public Campaign Focused on Response to Sexual Assault

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In partnership with the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners and a coalition of Washtenaw County law enforcement partners, this April SafeHouse Center is launching the *Start by Believing Campaign*, a national awareness campaign focused on the public response to sexual assault, as part of their promotion of Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

“In our work, we see survivors every day who are afraid to come forward for a range of reasons, chief among them a feeling that they could have prevented the violence and the belief that no one will believe they were raped. Through *Start by Believing*, it’s our goal to educate the public on how to respond appropriately to survivors, in a way that offers them support and encouragement,” said Barbara Niess-May, SafeHouse Center executive director. “The wrong response to a survivor coming forward adds another layer of trauma to the experience, and adds to the victim-shaming that often allows rapists to act without consequence.”

The *Start by Believing Campaign* of Washtenaw County will focus its efforts on creating awareness on how to positively respond to the survivors of sexual assault. The intended outcome is two-fold: To educate how to “start by believing” survivors to provide the support they need, and to inspire survivors to come forward to seek the help, knowing that they will be supported and believed.

“There’s not one, textbook way that a person acts when they have been assaulted,” Niess-May added. “Some may seem calm, others agitated, and others will seem scattered, so it’s critical for those who are the first to interact with these victims understand that just because their demeanor is unexpected doesn’t mean that they’re not telling the truth.”

Joining SafeHouse Center and Washtenaw County in *Start by Believing* are:

- University of Michigan Department of Public Safety and Security
- Eastern Michigan Department of Public Safety
- University of Michigan Health System
- St. Joseph Mercy Health System Ann Arbor Police Department
- Chelsea Police Department
- Concordia University Campus Safety
- Milan Police Department
- Northfield Township Police Department
- Pittsfield Township Department of Public Safety

- Saline Police Department
- Department of Veterans Affairs Police
- Ypsilanti Police Department
- Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority- Police Department
- Washtenaw Community College Campus Safety and Security
- Washtenaw County Sherriff's Department
- Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center at the University of Michigan

About SafeHouse Center

Based in Ann Arbor, Mich., SafeHouse Center is a non-profit organization that provides safety, support, advocacy and resources for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence and their children. It operates a 20-bedroom, 50-bed emergency shelter for survivors of domestic violence and their children. It also provides counseling, legal advocacy, support groups, and related services to a range of assault survivors. Core to its mission is working to change the systems and attitudes that allow abuse to continue. For more information, visit www.safehousecenter.org.

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