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TN Legislature OKs change in statute of limitations for rape

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Reported by Adrienne Flores - email

NASHVILLE, TN (WSMV) - Every two minutes, a person is sexually assaulted in the United States. While an estimated 97 percent of offenders won't spend a day in jail, Tennessee lawmakers did their part this week to increase the odds by passing a bill that would change the statute of limitations.

Amber Stevenson, a rape counselor at the Sexual Assault Center in Nashville, says victims experience a wide range of emotions, but she believes changes to the current law could go a long way in helping hundreds of clients heal.

"It impacts every part of their life - physical, emotional, spiritual - just their sense of safety," Stevenson said. "Often times, if there's been no arrest, there's been no report made, then they're going through every day not knowing if they're safe."

Right now, the statute of limitations for rape cases varies on the felony level: 15 years for a Class A, eight years for Class B and four years for a Class C or D.

But legislators in the Tennessee House have unanimously passed a bill eliminating the statute of limitations on rape cases filed within three years of the crime.

"I think it sends a strong message to our community that we care about survivors," Stevenson said. "And we're going to go after the people making the choice to rape no matter how long it takes."

The move came in response to a huge backlog in Memphis, where some 12,000 rape kits are waiting to be processed.

It's a problem facing law enforcement agencies across the country.

"I have some clients over a year," Stevenson said. "When they go through all the steps, which can be very traumatic just to get the exam, then it's, 'I may have to wait years to get this back.' And that can be very frustrating."

In December, actress Mariska Hargitay, known best for her role on the NBC drama *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, came to Tennessee on behalf of the Joyful Heart Foundation to push authorities to process rape kits faster.

"We're the agency, nine times out of 10, that does a lot of processing of the physical evidence," said Josh DeVine, spokesman for the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. "We really see this as a win for both law enforcement and the survivors of sexual assault. More time, obviously, means more information. And when we're working to solve these types of crimes, every little bit helps."

The bill is now on Gov. Bill Haslam's desk. If he signs the bill into law, it will go into effect July 1.

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