

# September Newsletter

## Back To the Backlog

### Special Dates

**September 9—  
Volunteer  
Meeting—4-5pm**

**Oct 12 –  
Celebration of  
Hope –6:30-  
10:00pm**

**Oct.1-Oct 31 -  
Domestic Violence  
Awareness Month**

### Current Needs

- Dish soap
- Liquid hand soap
- Hair conditioner
- New women's underwear
- Dryer sheets

We return to the rape kit backlog problem again this month, where we continue to explore how the backlog got this way, and what is being done to change it. As we found out previously, the backlog may come from a lack of services at the lab itself, or because the kits have not been sent to the lab from the police storage facilities. It is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands of untested kits throughout the U.S. So let's take a look at why kits may not make it from law enforcement to the lab.

There are many reasons why police departments might not send kits for processing, but we can group them into several main categories:

- **Lack of policies** - Most localities do not have written policies about how to handle testing of rape kits, so individual investigators use their discretion about whether to send the kits for testing. This decision may be based on whether the department prioritizes sexual assault, how prosecutable the investigator feels the case is, any personal biases that personnel might have about sexual assault cases, etc. Victim-blaming and negative stereotypes may contribute to law enforcement failing to believe survivors of sexual assault, thus decreasing the likelihood that rape kits will be given priority for testing.
- **Lack of training** - Law enforcement often lacks training on trauma and victimization. Because of the effect of trauma on our brains, a survivor's story may not seem credible due to lack of details, flat affect, etc.; this might lead to an unfounded case, resulting in the kit not being sent out for testing. Some survivors appear uncooperative if they decide not to move forward with prosecuting their assailant, but law enforcement may not recognize the victim's fear of the perpetrator, loss of privacy, or being blamed for the assault.
- **Lack of resources** - With the testing of each kit costing between \$1000-\$1500, many local jurisdictions feel they cannot afford to test every kit.
- **Identity of perpetrator** - The policy in many jurisdictions is to test kits only if the assailant is unknown to the victim. But testing does more than just identify unknown assailants; it can link unsolved crimes, helps to corroborate a survivor's story, and may even exonerate innocent suspects.

It seems like there are many hurdles to overcome, but there has actually been a lot of progress in the past few years in eliminating the backlog. *RAINN* and *Joyful Heart Foundation* have both conducted intensive campaigns to educate lawmakers and the public, as well as to provide on-going technical support to jurisdictions that are dedicated to eliminating their current backlog.

The US Dept. of Justice has provided grant funds through its Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, (SAKI), that have allowed 47,000 kits to be tested since 2015, with a number of major cities committed to addressing the backlog in their jurisdictions.

Keep an eye on the news as this effort continues to gain ground.

# Survivor Story

## Natasha Alexenko



In keeping with our recent exploration of the rape kit backlog, our story this month features a survivor of both sexual assault as well as the rape kit backlog. Natasha Alexenko is also an activist and educator, working to change the criminal justice system's response to sexual assault.

In 1993, Alexenko was robbed and raped at gunpoint by a stranger while she was a student in New York City. She resisted the urge to immediately shower, got to a hospital where she underwent a sexual assault exam, and felt confident that she had followed the necessary steps to bring this man to justice. Alexenko wanted him to be held responsible for her rape and to be kept from harming anyone else. She did not know that her rape kit would sit in a police storage room for nearly a decade. It joined 17,000 other untested kits throughout New York City.

In 2003, Alexenko received a call from the Manhattan District Attorney's office informing her that her kit had still not been processed, but there was a renewed effort to move forward with testing many of the backlogged kits. Since the statute of limitations was about to run out on her case, they decided to move forward with a "John Doe" indictment which would stop the clock on the statute of limitations for her case. Around the same time, the NY Medical Examiner's office joined CODIS, which maintains the DNA profiles of known offenders. These two events would eventually result in a conviction of Alexenko's rapist, four years later.

Fourteen years after her rape, Alexenko was finally able to give her victim impact statement to the court, and achieved some measure of closure, knowing that her assailant would be behind bars until 2057. Although justice was achieved in her case, the thought of the 17,000 other victims whose kits had not been tested in time to have such closure weighed heavily on Alexenko's mind. With the encouragement of a prosecutor in the Manhattan District Attorney's office, Alexenko made the decision to come forward as a survivor of sexual violence in order to provide support and encouragement for the thousands of other victims who might be reluctant to report their assaults. She decided that it was time to shed light on this devastating problem, to try to take away some of the stigma that surrounds sexual assault.

In 2011 Alexenko founded a nonprofit, *Natasha's Justice Project*, which is dedicated to eliminating the backlog of untested rape kits throughout the U.S., and to implement a process which would allow all kits to be tested within 30 days. As the founder and spokesperson of this project, Alexenko has partnered with numerous agencies and organizations such as *RAINN*, *The Joyful Heart Foundation* and the *National Center for Victims of Crimes*; together they are conducting research to determine the extent of the backlog problem, exploring the most effective ways to eliminate the backlog, engaging government officials and communities in raising awareness of the backlog, and advocating for rape kit reform legislation on all governmental levels. The *Justice Project* has raised funds for media outreach and public education, and even provides travel grants so that survivors can attend their attackers' trials.

Alexenko feels that people are taking sexual assault and the rape kit backlog much more seriously in the past few years; The US Department of Justice has awarded almost \$43 million in grants to assist localities in processing untested kits and prosecuting those cases.

In the words of Alexenko, *"More work is ahead to end the backlog and bring perpetrators to justice, but with our collective determination and support for one another, I know we can do it."*

## Recap of Events

### National Night Out

In an effort to expand our outreach throughout the county, we participated in the National Night Out events in three different towns this year! Lots of fun, music, food, games, and relationship-building were happening on August 6th and Response was happy to be a part of it all.

A big thanks to volunteers Wanda Rice, Lore Fogle, and Becky Wood for assisting staff at the events in Strasburg, Mt. Jackson, and New Market. The kids AND adults seemed to enjoy painting rocks at our tables — we really couldn't have done it without our volunteers!



### Around the shelter

Just a few pictures to catch you up on what's happening around here!

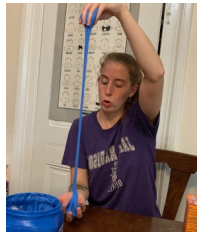


Meet Mikey, the neighborhood cat who likes to join our "Moving Beyond" support group when they hold their meetings on the porch!



We had a lot of excitement here one day when this HUGE tree was taken down—it was dead and posed a danger, so out it went!

Our staff gets to play with slime! —we're providing afterschool care for one of our kiddos until he can start at a daycare program. So important in order for his mom to keep her job!



MORE shelves, this time in the pantry! So much easier to keep organized when there is enough space!



## Upcoming Event

### Celebration of Hope

Ok folks, only 6 more weeks until our biggest fundraiser of the year! It's time to make plans to join us at Cave Ridge Vineyard for the 2nd annual Celebration of Hope!

In addition to music by The Foundry Street Project, Rutz's BBQ will be providing an Oktoberfest dinner, and guests will receive a complimentary glass of wine. Free beer and soda will also be available throughout the evening. Look for exciting silent auction items as well. So there will be lots of fun happening!

It is now crunch time as far as selling tickets and promoting our event—please "like" and comment on any Facebook posts that you see on our page, (that helps the posts be seen by more folks), and feel free to share any posts in order to reach the widest audience possible. Take flyers to your workplace, civic groups, etc., and let folks know what a fun event this is!

Thanks for your help in making this a successful fundraiser!

