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Spotlight On: Parents for Megan's Law

By Elizabeth Nunez

According to Parents for Megan's Law, "one in three girls and one in six boys" under the age of eighteen is sexually abused. Parents for Megan's Law is a not-for-profit organization that is dedicated to fighting this frightening statistic that shows the prevalence of child sexual abuse in today's society. Laura Ahearn, a certified social worker, created the organization because she was frustrated by the tremendous difficulty she underwent when attempting to get information about Megan's Law. The organization is based in New York and is committed to informing victims of their rights and helping victims obtain compensation for the criminal wrongdoings that they have suffered. One of the ways that Parents for Megan's Law carries out its mission is by working to prevent and treat victims of child sexual abuse and rape.

Parents for Megan's Law runs several local and national programs to meet its goals. At the local level in New York, the organization provides counseling through a twenty-four-hour hotline for victims of sexual abuse and refers callers to local law enforcement when necessary.

The organization also helps victims in Suffolk County recuperate compensation for expenses or losses caused by violent crimes such as robbery, assault, domestic violence, kidnapping and sexual assault through the Suffolk County Crime Victims Center. According to Ahearn, who serves as the executive director of Parents for Megan's Law, the majority of victims are not even aware of this right. Ahearn states, "most people don't know that if you are a victim of a violent crime, you are entitled to services and crime victim compensation." The center in Suffolk County also helps victims file claims for compensation in New York to recuperate for property damages, injuries, and death.

The organization is also committed to victim advocacy through supporting local New York victims of sexual abuse and violent crimes with members of the organization accompanying victims to courtrooms and medical appointments for support. The organization operates a community support program through its Megan's Law Helpline, which provides the public with information about registered sex offenders in their neighborhood.

In addition, Parents for Megan's Law is dedicated to educating local communities about sexual abuse prevention. For example, staff from the organization visit elementary and high schools in the area and teach about child and teen sexual abuse and rape prevention. Members of the organization also engage in educating other programs and businesses about adult sexual abuse prevention. Furthermore, Parents for Megan's Law provides instruction to government agencies on the appropriate uses of sex offender registries.

Currently, Parents for Megan's Law offers members of the community in both Suffolk County and Nassau County the chance to report complaints about sex offender registration violations. The organization sends complaints to local law enforcement

officials, who have been very successful in handling issues when they arise. For example, one anonymous tip led to the arrest of a registered sex offender who was in contact with children in violation of his probation. After an investigation, the individual was sentenced to four years in prison.

Parents for Megan's Law's most recent work in the New York community is commendable: Nassau County recently hired Parents for Megan's Law as a private consultant to assist with monitoring registered sex offenders, "including tracking their posts on social media and creating a smartphone app that the public can use to report potential violations such as new allegations of abuse." This is not the first time Parents for Megan's Law has teamed up with a New York county. In fact, the Suffolk County Crime Victims Center is one of the organization's programs that offers victims of violent crimes information and referrals for help and support.

On the national level, Parents for Megan's Law is committed to helping victims of sexual abuse and other violent crimes. The organization conducts national surveys of law enforcement officials in every state that maintains a sex offender registry. Through these surveys, Parents for Megan's Law evaluates the application and enforcement of notification laws and sex offender registries throughout the country. The organization's child pornography and child sex tourism reporting center accepts and transfers all anonymous reports of child pornography and trafficking websites to police agencies in order to effectively address the problem. Parents for Megan's Law has also helped create uniformity in sex predator offender registration and notification laws in every state by lobbying through its policy and legislative support program. The organization's surveys have even been used by the United States Justice Department. In addition, Parents for Megan's Law operates a national Megan's Law helpline that helps victims get referrals for services and law enforcement and also helps keep the community informed about sex offender registries by answering questions. Additionally, members of the public can register online for the organization's newsletter that it publishes through its website to educate the public about preventing sexual abuse.

The advocacy and support that Parents for Megan's Law provides, both locally and nationally, has helped countless victims of child sexual abuse understand their rights and stand up for themselves, and will only continue to do so as the organization's programs evolve and expand.

Sources:

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