

PROSECUTORS CAN HELP END THE CYCLE OF SILENCE

Most victims of sexual assault do not report the crime to law enforcement. Many never tell anyone. Then because so few assaults are reported – most perpetrators walk free – and survivors don't get the help and support they need.

It's time to end this cycle. As a prosecutor, you can take the lead.

WHAT IS START BY BELIEVING?

Start by Believing is a public awareness campaign designed to end the cycle of silence and change the way we respond to sexual assault. It was first launched in April 2011. Since then, thousands of professionals across the country have made their own personal commitment. This includes many prosecutors such as yourself:

My name is Melissa Saterbak. I am a prosecutor, a mother, and a believer. I am invested personally and professionally in helping victims be heard and in bringing offenders to justice. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is John. I am a prosecutor and a husband to the daughter of a survivor. When a victim comes to me with the courage to report a sex assault, I Start by Believing.

My name is Matt. I am a prosecuting attorney. As a prosecutor I have spent hours listening to friends and strangers tell me about their assault and what they have lost. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

But it's more than just a personal pledge. By transforming personal and professional responses to sexual assault, we can help victims pursue justice and healing.

Failed responses... additional victims.

Stop the cycle and make our communities safer.

WHY IS THE PLEDGE IMPORTANT?

Decades of research demonstrates that sexual assault victims are often doubted or blamed, and these negative responses have a number of harmful effects. They also decrease the chance that victims will report the crime and reach out for help.



My name is Jane. I am a rape survivor who pressed charges and my case was not billed by the grand jury. The female prosecutor said my father told her I was lying.

This is why the message of Start by Believing is so vital - outcomes will only change when sexual assault reports are investigated from an initial presumption of merit.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS?

Anyone can make a commitment to Start by Believing in their personal life. But for those working in the criminal justice system, some have questioned whether participating in the campaign might compromise the ability of prosecutors to remain objective, potentially opening them up to attacks by defense counsel and/or losing cases at trial.

These are legitimate questions, stemming from our shared concern that sexual assault cases must be investigated and prosecuted based on the evidence.

First, it is important to clarify that this does not necessarily mean saying the exact words, “I believe you.” Many criminal justice professionals use phrases like, “I’m sorry this happened to you.” The important issue is not the exact words that are used, but the fact that victims are treated with compassion and respect, and their reports are handled professionally and fairly – instead of communicating the message that they are not believed. This undermines the ability of criminal justice professionals to conduct an thorough interview, which then limits the chance of successfully prosecuting a case when the facts and evidence warrant.

Want to learn more? Our [Training Bulletin](#) addresses this question in detail.

TAKE THE PLEDGE

Start by making your own personal commitment to Start by Believing.

- I pledge to Start by Believing when someone tells me about their sexual assault.
- I pledge to help survivors on the road to justice and healing.
- I pledge to end the cycle of silence.

[Pledge now](#)



Ramsey County Attorney
John J. Choi



SPREAD THE WORD

Then share the message with others. We have all the tools you need. Check out our [personal action kit](#) and [community action kit](#) to learn how to get started.

Encourage leadership to make the pledge. When the message comes from the top, it trickles down into daily actions that have a powerful impact on the community. You can encourage strong leadership in your agency and community. District Attorney Matt Ballard did just that in [Oklahoma District 12](#).

Rogers County
Courthouse, Oklahoma



Kick off your campaign with a press conference: Follow the example of Denver, Colorado, where their event was a true representation of what multidisciplinary collaboration looks like. Participants included Mayor Michael B. Hancock's office, the Denver District Attorney's Office, the Denver Department of Public Safety, the Denver Police Department, the Denver Sheriff Department, the Denver Fire Department, Denver Health Medical Center, the Sexual Assault Interagency Council, and The Blue Bench (a community-based sexual assault advocacy program). Also featured was a [young male survivor and his mother](#).



Reach out to local media outlets to announce your campaign, such as this coverage in [Rogers County Oklahoma](#).

Use social media: Let your virtual audience know about your commitment to Start by Believing. And don't forget to use #StartbyBelieving.

Use creative marketing to reach thousands: In Denver, the campaign message was prominently displayed on three billboards throughout the city, as well as 50 bus shelter advertisements, and 20 Yellow Cab displays. An additional 2,000 Yellow Cabs had bumper stickers proclaiming the Start by Believing message.

Yellow cab displays



Need more support? Submit a request for [technical assistance](#). Thank you for becoming a Start by Believing Ally!

