

ABC NEWS

Sexual assault service in Tasmania flooded with victim calls for help

By Natalie Whiting

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PHOTO: "It was impacting on my life, work, study and relationships," says sexual abuse victim Mary. (ABC News)

Tasmania's Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) has experienced a 34 per cent increase in the number of people accessing help in the past financial year and says the sector needs further resourcing.

CEO Jill Maxwell said it was great to see people reaching out for help but the increase in clients was putting a strain on the service.

"We do our best, we triage referrals that come in and we do offer one-off appointments until we can allocate a client to a counsellor for ongoing counselling, and we do have our phone service," she said.

"But it does put a strain on our resources and, unfortunately, we do have a wait list but we do our best to get people in fairly quickly."

SASS offers a 24-hour crisis centre and counselling as well as training programs.

Ms Maxwell said she would like to see a similar approach to sexual assault as to what was happening for domestic violence.

"I think we need to look at sexual assault in the same way and look at what the state needs in terms of support," she said.

"And certainly we need more resourcing in light of the increase of referrals."

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Sexual assault support services:

- National university support line: **1800 572 224** (until November 30, 2017)
- 1800 RESPECT: **1800 737 732**
- Lifeline: **131 114**
- Beyond Blue: **1300 224 636**

'I wouldn't have gotten through without them'

Mary is receiving help from SASS after years of sexual abuse.

"I had multiple experiences of abuse over a long time, from the time of childhood right into my late teenage years," she said.

"From those incidents of abuse, I found I was experiencing flashbacks, with no warning of when they would happen.

"It was impacting my day-to-day life, it was impacting my work, it was impacting study and it was impacting my relationships."

Mary said small things, like a piece of fabric, could bring on a flashback.

Three years ago she reached out to SASS for help.

"I go to SASS regularly and they have provided me with counselling services and also strategies to cope with flashbacks," she said.

"I wouldn't have gotten through the last three years without them."

Mary said confidentiality was a vital aspect of SASS.

"It's still really hard to talk about, I would never talk about it with my friends, I would never talk about it with my family," she said.

Increase in demand for services expected

The increased demand on SASS appears to be continuing.

"The first month of this financial year we've seen the biggest increase we've had in six years," Ms Maxwell said.

The service is also preparing for a possible increase in people seeking help following the release of the Australian Human Rights report into sexual abuse and assault at universities.

"Given that we know it's grossly under-reported and the higher profile that we get, the more that people are going to seek help, which is good," she said.

Tasmania Police also said it was anticipating an increase in reporting from students.

"If there is an increase in reporting, I think that's a good thing because it means people are feeling more comfortable to report the matter to police," Commissioner Darren Hine said.

Mary believed the public attention on the issue would likely make it easier for others to seek help.

"I think it makes it more comfortable to seek help," she said.

"There won't be such a stigma to come forward anymore."

The State Government is working with the service in the face of growing demand.

"I can indicate that Jill Maxwell and myself will be meeting next week to discuss the 34 per cent increase and to work out a strategic plan for how to tackle sexual assaults in Tasmania," Minister for Human Services Jacqui Petrusma said.

Topics: sexual-offences, law-crime-and-justice, sexuality, community-and-society, tas

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