

Professor: Dealing with sexual abuse ‘very challenging’

By PAUL E. KOSTYU, GateHouse Columbus Bureau Chief

COLUMBUS – There were warning signs, but the Alliance mother of two didn’t know them. Her son and daughter were raped in 2005 by a neighborhood teenager who also abused other youngsters.

Her daughter has completed therapy and her son is getting treatment, and she thinks they will recover from the experience, but she’s worried other parents might miss the same signs she did.

“He was very, very, very fun and kind to them to gain their trust,” she said of her children’s attacker. “He was someone we knew. My husband had grown up with his family. They went to the same church.”

Then the problems started. The teen “got meaner and meaner. Our kids hid the problem from us. He would threaten them with a knife or used a cigarette to burn them.” But

every time she saw her children had been hurt, they lied about their injuries because the teen was always there. “He made sure they didn’t tell the truth,” she said.

In fact, 85 percent of sexual offenses are committed by family, friends or neighbors, according to David L. Burton, a professor at Smith College who is considered an authority on the issue. Burton was the keynote speaker Thursday at a conference about juvenile sex offenders.

“That makes dealing with the problem very challenging,” he told about 400 state and local officials. “We are the abusers. People like us.”

Burton said one in four children is assaulted by age 18, and 90 percent of the assaults on females go unreported. The good news, he said, is that it appears sexual assaults are declining, about 50 percent over 20 years.

“Day in and day out, this is a critical issue for us,” said Thomas Stickrath, director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services.

Stickrath said juvenile sex offenders respond more favorably to treatment, supervision and support than adult sexual offenders. Juvenile offenders “are not destined to become adult sex offenders. We need to talk about that in our communities,” he said.

The problem, Stickrath said, is a lack of consistency in the assessment and treatment of offenders. “We need to develop a more strategic plan. The solution doesn’t rest with one agency.”

Cheri L. Walter, chief executive officer of the Ohio Assn. of County Behavioral Health Authorities, said

a variety of agencies need to work together, including law enforcement; mental health, drug and alcohol addiction services; juvenile courts; foster care agencies; children services; and mental retardation and developmental disabilities agencies.

Dave Schaffer, executive director of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Tuscarawas and Carroll counties, said he went to the conference to learn the best practices to deal with youthful offenders.

“We need to talk about this,” he said, “for public safety, how to prevent situations and to collaborate with other partners.”

Randall Huber, a services and support administrator with the Stark County Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities agency, said juvenile sex offenses are a “fairly consistent problem” in the county.

“We need early detection and to get involved with adolescents in the community,” he said.

Something else that might help is Senate Bill 10, which Gov. Ted Strickland signed last month and which goes into full effect in January. It is designed to bring Ohio in line with the federal Adam Walsh Act for dealing with sexual offenders. Burton said Ohio “has done it better than any state in the country.” He also said Ohio has one of the best systems for evaluating and delivering services in the country.

That’s all well and good, but the Alliance mother wants parents to be alert for signs. Her son’s school grades declined, he got angrier and more aggressive when he was abused.

“This happens more than anybody realizes,” she said. “Parents need to know.”

Ohio statistics

- The state has 445 sex offenders in institutions run by the Ohio Department of Youth Services and 242 on parole.
- The average length of stay for a juvenile sex offender in a department facility is about twice that of a non-sex offender.
- 89 percent of sex offenders have had mental health counseling prior to commitment to a facility.
- 35 percent of sex offenders are on the department’s mental health caseload.
- About 65 percent of the sex offenders have significant drug problems requiring treatment compared to 78 percent of the total population in youth facilities.
- About 54 percent of sex offenders need special education compared to 36 percent of the total population at youth facilities.
- 65 percent of juvenile sex offenders are white.

Source: Ohio Assn. of County Behavioral Health Authorities

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