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EDITORIAL

College sexual violence must be dealt with by police

The Advance/SILive recently completed a three-part report detailing how sexual violence is dealt with on college campuses.

Although the three institutions of higher learning on Staten Island were a focus of the project, the issue is not just a Staten Island one. It is a national issue.

The Staten Island colleges are playing by the rules.

Those rules need to be changed.

Basically, colleges are in charge of investigating and “prosecuting” reports of sexual assault that are made to the school. If a woman is raped on campus, and reports it to the school, the institution is not mandated to report that accusation to the police.

To put it in perspective:

There were eight reported rapes at Wagner College in 2014/2015. There were seven reported incidents of sexual assault at the College of Staten Island during the past 14 years, as well as five incidents of dating violence and five incidents of stalking. There were no reports at St. John’s Staten Island campus.

As reporter Kristin Dalton noted: There have been no arrests, no criminal records and no registered sex offenders as a result.

That is not to say everyone was innocent. That is to say the matters were handled by campus tribunals made up of school personnel — faculty and students.

What expertise these people have in dealing with what are such tragic, sensitive and often life-changing situations escapes us.

The only reason we even know these crimes were reported is because of a federal mandate that forces colleges that receive federal student aid to submit an annual report of campus safety and security statistics.

College officials who spoke to the Advance/SILive insisted that all reports are taken seriously and robust investigations take place. Disciplinary action can include anything from changing a residence hall to prevent contact between the accuser and the accused, to expulsion if found guilty.

So it would seem the most a campus rapist would have to worry about is finding another school to attend, instead of serving time in prison or registering as a sex offender, if the matter is handled internally.

It is beyond a “get-out-of-jail-free” card and more like, “I just got away with it” card.

Although college officials say that part of their victim counseling includes the suggestion that a police report could be filed, a court order of protection pursued, or a medical exam be performed, it is our opinion — with all due respect to the colleges — that there is little incentive for them to actually push those options.

Or certainly to report the alleged crime themselves.

The last thing any college wants is a headline in the local newspaper screaming about a rape reported on campus.

United States Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand has taken on this issue and is proposing new laws, along with 36 other senators, to revamp how sexual violence is dealt with on campuses.

She says her Campus Accountability & Safety Act would create more transparency throughout the process, and strengthen the type of counseling offered.

But it stops short of mandating that colleges report alleged crimes on campus to police. Justice, we think, should be administered by law enforcement and the courts. Not academia.

The NYPD and district attorneys' office in the five boroughs have people specially trained to handle sexual assault cases. If a victim is hesitant to pursue his or her case, law enforcement is equipped to explain the pros and cons of going forward as opposed to not.

And this is not all about the accuser. The accused has every right to a professional and fair hearing as well.

If there is a silver lining in the dark cloud Donald Trump created with his "locker room talk" about how he is allowed to treat women, it is that it is finally out there and being talked about.

If a man tells you he is in a lot of locker rooms, and he has never heard such talk, then he is not listening.

For too long, such crude talk and behavior has been tolerated and it fuels the idea in the minds of some — in itself often fueled by alcohol — that they can do as they please.

It's time to say NO, loudly and clearly — with tough laws to back it up. Sen. Gillibrand's legislation is a significant step, and should become law.

But we think bringing in law enforcement at the earliest opportunity is the best way to send the message.

Let the professionals work with the victims. Let the professionals do the investigations. Let the courts decide if punishment is warranted or not.

And let the colleges finally admit that sexual violence on campus is no different than sexual violence in an apartment across the street.

Shining the bright light of public opinion is the best, and often only, way to bring change.

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