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Joyful Heart Foundation: Legislation takes multiple steps towards sexual assault kit reform

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With the opening of the Wisconsin legislative session, lawmakers have introduced multiple bills that would enact sweeping sexual assault kit reform throughout the state. Two bills introduced, S.B. 71 and S.B. 94, would improve how rape kits are handled in the state and establish a statewide rape kit tracking system, respectively. Additionally, Governor Evers has included language in his proposed budget similar to the provisions of S.B. 71. The Joyful Heart Foundation and the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA) stand together in strong support of both S.B. 71 and S.B. 94 and are urging lawmakers to pass these important bills for survivors of sexual violence.

S.B. 71 is identical to A.B. 214, a bill that failed to pass last session. S.B. 71 would require law enforcement to pick up collected rape kits from medical facilities within 72 hours and submit to a laboratory for testing within 14 days. These provisions ensure that newly collected rape kits are handled uniformly across the state and prevent future backlogs by establishing timeframes for submission and testing rape kits. Passage of this legislation would bring answers and justice to victims of sexual assault, take dangerous offenders off the streets, and would support survivors of sexual assault's healing by enabling them to track the location and status of their rape kits.

"Mandating the swift submission of every sexual assault kit for testing sends a

powerful message to survivors that they—and their cases—matter," says Ilse Knecht, Joyful Heart's Director of Policy and Advocacy. "It sends a message to perpetrators that they will be held accountable for their crimes. It is also the pathway to a more effective criminal justice system and safer communities. Additionally, giving survivors access to information about their kits can help counter the loss of self-determination and control that is often at the core of a sexual assault experience."

"These bills are a critical part of a trauma-informed response to sexual assault," says Pennie Meyers, Executive Director of WCASA. "They restore power to survivors by providing them with options and clear expectations regarding evidence collection along with the ability to anonymously access information about the location and status of their kit at a time and place of their choosing."

Behind every rape kit is a person—a sexual assault survivor—waiting for justice. By passing S.B. 71 and S.B. 94, Wisconsin would be taking meaningful steps to bring a path to healing and justice to survivors.

If you would like an interview or additional comment by Ilse Knecht of the Joyful Heart Foundation or Ian Henderson of WCASA, please feel free to contact me to set up an interview. Additionally, you can learn more about our legislative efforts in Wisconsin at http://www.endthebacklog.org/wisconsSend to: ianh@wcasa.orgin.