



The Assault Survivor Kit comes with a sweat set, socks, underwear, toiletries and a nice message. Since 1997, the Assistance League of the Eastside has assisted 21,970 assault survivors through the Assault Survivor Kit program. Photo courtesy of Assistance League of the Eastside.

Assault kits provide ‘fresh start’ for survivors

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

By [Raechel Dawson](#)

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One-third of the sexual assault survivors Susan Johnson helps at EvergreenHealth Medical Center have met their rapists through online dating websites or Apps.

Usually the two have chatted a few times back and forth before agreeing to meet in person, Johnson says. Sometimes the sexual assault occurs on the first date, other times, not until the second or third date.

“The pedophile has been grooming this person to trust them and believe them over the course of time,” Johnson, a forensic nurse, said. “And, then, usually rapes the victim – not necessarily very violent but usually has alcohol involved.”

Those Johnson sees then typically come in for a rape examination anywhere from that night to several days later.

The process of waiting in an emergency room, answering questions in an interview, undergoing an examination – which can include photographing the assault – and then an hour for discharge, can take up to five hours.

But during what could be one of the worst days of a sexual assault survivor's life, one Redmond-based nonprofit is making every effort to provide a glimmer of hope.

Since 1997, the Assistance League of the Eastside has helped nearly 22,000 people through their Assault Survivor Kit program. During discharge, patients are given an Assault Survivor Kit, which includes a change of clothing (sweat shirt, sweat pants, socks, underwear), hygiene products and a note of encouragement – all signed by those who put together the package.

The kits are important because investigators typically take the clothing survivors were assaulted in as evidence, leaving the person assaulted going home in a paper gown the hospital provides.

“A fresh start, I would say, is a great way to call it,” Johnson said of the Assault Survivor Kits. “It basically allows them to feel as though it's a cleansing process. Now their hair is brushed and it's not still there, it's not still on their body. They're getting ready to move forward and they've survived.”

Johnson recalled one survivor, a 21-year-old developmentally delayed woman, said her sweatshirt “felt like a big hug.”

“And that's exactly what she needed,” Johnson said, noting that remark has stuck with her.

Kendra Valentine, co-chair of the Assault Survivor Kits program with Assistance League of the Eastside, said the 27-member committee for the program distributed about 1,000 sweat sets and 2,300 item total to local hospitals around Washington state in the 2016-17 fiscal year. Overlake Hospital and Kaiser Permanente in Bellevue and EvergreenHealth Medical Center in Kirkland receive the kits.

“Our program has grown over the last two years by about 21 percent,” Valentine said. “The need for services is always increasing.”

Valentine said she believes a factor in the increase can be attributed to the rise of human trafficking in the South King County area.

Johnson, however, has seen an increase of survivors needing rape kits on the Eastside as well. She believes it's either because the Eastside's population is growing and more people are going to EvergreenHealth versus Harborview Medical Center or because more feel comfortable coming forward. The #MeToo movement, she said, could be credited for the latter scenario.

“When I first started, we were seeing about 30 patients on the Eastside and now we are averaging about 100 on the Eastside,” Johnson said, noting she's been a nurse for 23 years and worked at Harborview Medical Center as a SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) from 2009-11 before overlapping/moving to EvergreenHealth in 2010.

Janet Friedberg, president of Assistance League of the Eastside, said the first hospital to accept Assault Survivor Kits from the nonprofit was EvergreenHealth in 1992.

“And they started with five kits,” Friedberg said. “The way it started growing is SANE nurses would go to conference and start telling each other about the support they were receiving from the Assistance League. Nurses started contacting us and we realized we needed to raise more money to provide more.”

Through direct donations (or what's called restrictive donations), grants and fundraising events, the Assistance League of the Eastside raises enough money to make the kits each year – about \$12,000 annually.

“We do a really amazing job of making every one of those dollars count,” Friedberg said. “Our people find the very best prices for sweatsuits.”

Valentine said they try to keep the kits below \$10 and said they've found sweatshirts for as low as \$3 a piece.

The Assault Survivor Kits are distributed to 40 hospitals across the state of Washington, which is the farthest reach the nonprofit has. All of their other programs, such as Operation School Bell, Starting Over Support and Help4Homeless programs, have an Eastside-specific focus.

Although a good amount of Johnson's survivors have met their assailant online, she notes sexual assault can happen to anyone and can come from anyone. She's seen men assaulted by women, transgender survivors, gay men assaulted by other gay men or straight men, women raped by women and of course any mixture of the above with family members or those who were trusted.

But, regardless of who or how, Johnson said a common misconception is survivors cannot get a rape examination if they've already showered.

“That is so false!” she said. “There are so many great things with DNA and all that stuff that's happened since back in the day and we can get evidence traced. Not everybody scrubs their body in the way others do. I might still have transfer DNA on me that somebody else doesn't, so it's always better to get tested than not.”

To learn more about the Assault Survivor Kits or to donate, visit www.aleastside.org/ask.