

Going to the Ledge for Victims

The Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault strives to improve laws impacting sexual assault victims each year. Polly Poskin and Lyn M. Schollett work on legislative issues for ICASA. The following is an interview with Poskin and Schollett regarding ICASA's legislative work.

Question: What is ICASA's role at the Legislature?

Lyn: ICASA is the only organization at the Illinois capitol that speaks just for sexual assault victims. So it's our job to identify bills that are out there that impact sexual assault victims and provide our input on those bills. It's also our job to initiate bills that will better serve sexual assault victims.

Polly: ICASA is at the legislature because we're the voice of the survivor and the advocate for the continuation of the services for survivors. Counseling and advocacy are services for survivors; prevention education and institutional advocacy are services for the community. All of these services put together strengthen the community. Stronger communities are better able to address sexual violence and provide support to the victim and the families. In stronger communities, the criminal justice system is better able to address the crime against the people. It's our role to see to it that that range of services continues in a community. We can't do that without providing the legislative and statutory support or without the employment of people to provide the services.

Q: Has ICASA always been at the legislature?

Polly: Yes. In 1982 the Illinois legislature defeated the ERA. Many of us had worked for the passage of the ERA and had become familiar with the legislative process. That is the time period when funding for rape crisis centers began and we were ready to make other legislative changes. We didn't take the defeat of the ERA as a loss. We said let's build on all the experience we gained. At that time we were looking at the sex crimes in the state of Illinois and we said it's time for revision and now is the time to do it.

Lyn: One of the things that has changed over the years is that we actually have to register as lobbyists. So Polly and I are registered at the legislature as lobbyist for ICASA.

Q: Why is it important to have an organization whose job is solely to look after rights of sexual assault victims?

Lyn: There are other groups at the capitol that sometimes work on bills that affect sexual assault victims, but all of them have to look out for other constituents as well, such as state's attorneys and law enforcement. We often work

collaboratively with them, but it's never their job just to look out for the interests of sexual assault victims. Sometimes sexual assault victims' interests are very much aligned with what prosecutors and law enforcement officials need in the state of Illinois, but sometimes they are different and when those interests are different, it's up to us to represent just the interest of the victims.

Q: How does ICASA decide what bills it will support?

Lyn: In terms of the bills that we initiate, our Public Affairs Committee meets five times a year and the job of the Public Affairs Committee is to identify areas where the law could be improved to better serve sexual assault victims. The committee is big; it has about 30 people on it. Most of them are court advocates from rape crisis centers. We also have a number of allies on the committee, including prosecutors, law enforcement and the Office of the Illinois Attorney General. In the fall, the Public Affairs Committee goes through a decision making process of identifying possible initiatives and then prioritizing them. Last year, we had 10 or 11 great ideas that the committee looked at and they picked their top three. Then the Public Affairs Committee makes a recommendation to Governing Body on the bills we will initiate. There was a lot of debate in our Public Affairs Committee this fall on the bills we would initiate because we had such great suggestions.

Q: Once Public Affairs and Governing Body agree on the priorities for the legislative session, what do you do then?

Lyn: The next step is to draft the bills. Usually we start in house by putting together what we think the language should be for a bill and we take that language to the legislative reference bureau, LRB.

Polly: We also reach out to whoever is to be an ally in the drafting stage.

Lyn: We try to do that as early as we can so that the early drafts of the bill reflect the interest of other organizations and entities that might be invested in the bill. Once the bill is drafted it comes out of Legislative Review Bureau, then we take it to the sponsor and the sponsor files the bill.

Q: How do you find a sponsor?

Lyn: We find a sponsor based on an individual legislator's interest in particular areas. We work in a very bipartisan way, so our sponsors are Democrats and Republicans. We decide whether a bill starts in the House or Senate based on strategic reasons.

Q: What happens after you file the bill?

Lyn: It first goes to the Rules Committee, which is not a public committee. All bills

go there first. Once they leave the Rules Committee, they go to a substantive committee. Once it's in that committee, that's when the lobbying gets serious. We meet with the members of the committee, explain the bill and ask for their support. When the bill is called for a hearing in committee, we testify before the committee in support of the bill. Once the bill is out of committee, it goes to the floor of the House or Senate. This is when the role of rape crisis centers becomes especially important because every rape crisis center has Representatives and Senators serving their districts. It is very important that Representatives and Senators hear from their local rape crisis center about the importance of individual bills. To pass out of the House or Senate the bill has to have a simple majority. Once it passes out of the first chamber, it goes to the second chamber and we go through the whole process again.

Q: How can rape crisis centers help this process?

Polly: The centers are often the source of the changes that are needed in the law because they are working directly with survivors or law enforcement or prosecutors. They can sometimes first identify where the gaps are in the law. So they help by bringing ideas to the Public Affairs Committee. If the idea doesn't originate with them, center staff are the best sounding board. Then center staff come on Constituent Visit Day and get a steep immersion in the lobbying process. When they go home, they continue to meet with their legislators. They are integral from beginning to end.

Q: How do you deal with those trying to block your legislative proposals?

Lyn: One of the most challenging things about working at the legislature is responding to our opposition. Sometimes we can be surprised by the responses to our bills. We work very hard to persuade legislators to our side and if they don't agree with us, to disagree respectfully and maintain a good working relationship. Someone that might be your opponent on one bill could be your ally on the next bill.

Q: What do you think people don't understand about the legislature?

Polly: They are intimidated by its stature. It's like anything that you aren't familiar with on a day-to-day basis. Once a person becomes familiar with how the legislative process works there isn't anything that is overwhelming and intimidating about it. It's simply the process that needs to be used, but that takes familiarity with it and working with it. And until that happens it can seem like it's unapproachable.

Lyn: Just sheer volume – the number of bills the legislature reviews every year. This year well over 6,000 bills have been introduced. I think the other issue is that sometimes people that aren't at the capitol regularly might think that they aren't experts or don't have an important voice on bills. The reality is that in the

world of sexual assault, the people at rape crisis centers are the biggest experts on what victims need. That's why it is so important for rape crisis centers to talk to legislators about pending bills.

Q: Is it fun?

Lyn: It's great fun. I love lobbying. To me it feels like an incredibly proactive part of our work. It is so gratifying for an advocate to come and say "I worked with a victim and this is where the law didn't work as well as it could have." To create a solution and then to shepherd that solution through the General Assembly is tremendously rewarding. It's also really fun to convince someone who didn't initially like our bill that they should support it!

Polly: It's a very satisfying experience. Sometimes it's fun and sometimes it's frustrating, but it's always satisfying. I think that one of the things I've learned, is whether we're working with the staff over there or the legislators or our allies, they are people who are immensely committed to the job of making government work. And I know sometimes people have negative comments about government and how government works, but it's never been my experience in working at the General Assembly that people are negative or resistant or cynical. It isn't to say that we don't all have our days, but for the most part I'm very impressed with the caliber of people's good intentions and hard work.