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PAVSA and partners announce A Step Forward
Public awareness campaign highlights reforms in handling cases

DULUTH—PAVSA, the Duluth Police Department and the St. Louis County Attorney’s Office today announced reforms and safeguards to make the system handling cases of sexual violence more responsive.

The agencies also unveiled A Step Forward, a public awareness campaign in the Duluth area starting today that highlights these improvements and help for anyone stepping forward to report sexual violence.

“Five years ago, we came together to announce that the backlog of sexual assault kits had been eliminated,” said Sara Niemi, PAVSA’s executive director. “Since then, we have worked to improve our response in Duluth, St. Louis County and Minnesota. We have put in place safeguards to prevent future backlogs. Survivors can have confidence when they step forward. Our system has stepped forward to support them.”

She added: “A Step Forward, our public awareness campaign, highlights these reforms. Starting today and through the next few months, you’ll see messaging throughout our community, from DTA buses to billboards to advertisements and messages online.”

The campaign, coinciding with the start of April’s Sexual Assault Awareness Month, highlights three key changes made to enhance victim-survivors confidence and support:

Prosecution: The State of Minnesota updated its criminal sexual conduct statutes, including the elimination of the statute of limitations in certain cases, and closing the voluntary intoxication loophole. Victim-survivors now have more access to justice.

Law enforcement: All unrestricted sexual assault kits, which are accompanied by victim-survivor release forms, are submitted to the state crime laboratory for testing within 60 days. All restricted sexual assault
kits, which are not accompanied by release forms, are submitted to the state crime lab for storage within 60 days. Victim-survivors who report to law enforcement can be assured that their evidence will be tested with their consent.

**Advocacy:** Track-Kit, a secure web-based portal, now allows victim-survivors to track their evidence from the hospital to the state crime laboratory. Victim-survivors have a right to know the status of their kits.

More information about these changes and A Step Forward is available at pavsa.org/forward.

Duluth Police Chief Mike Ceynowa said the reforms include his department adding staff to better handle cases, in partnership with PAVSA and its Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner programs at four regional hospitals.

“These reforms demonstrate our commitment to a victim-centered response,” he said. “Partnering with PAVSA and its SANE programs, victims have options about if, how and when to report.”

Duluth Mayor Emily Larson thanked the team for its ongoing efforts and announced a mayoral proclamation declaring April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month in Duluth. The proclamation includes a call to community members to “foster greater public awareness of the causes and effects of sexual violence and commit to addressing this problem on every civic level.”

**ABOUT PAVSA:**
PAVSA, the Program for Aid to Victims of Sexual Assault, is a nonprofit sexual violence crisis center in south St. Louis County that provides free and confidential services to victim-survivors, their families and friends ages 13 and up. PAVSA’s services are available regardless of whether the violence happened yesterday or years ago. We ensure that everyone, regardless of gender identity, language, ability, race, ethnicity, income, age, immigration status or religion is given the support to heal from the trauma of sexual violence and help stop the cycle of violence.

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