

# Board and Commission Council Committee Agenda Item Request

**Name of Board or Commission:**

**COMMISSION FOR WOMEN**

**Request Number: 20170809-003b**

**Description of Item:**

Request by the Commission for Women regarding survivors of sexual assault

Board or Commission Vote to refer item to Council: The Commission for Women approved the request in their August scheduled meeting with a vote of 7-0.

Date of Approval of Request: August 9, 2017

**Attachments:** ☒ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please list the attachments: 20170809-003b\_ACWRequest\_Sexual\_Assault\_Survivors

**Attest: Mary C. Aversa, Staff liaison**

## MAYOR'S OFFICE USE ONLY

**Council Committee Assigned:**

- ☐ Audit and Finance Committee
- ☐ Austin Energy Utility Oversight Committee
- ☐ Mobility Committee
- ☐ Health and Human Services Committee
- ☐ Housing and Planning Committee

Recommend a Fiscal Analysis be completed?

Recommend a Legal Analysis be completed?

Notes:

**Mayor Signature & Date:**



## CITY OF AUSTIN COMMISSION FOR WOMEN

Whereas the Austin Commission for Women serves as an advisory body to the city council and city manager concerning the needs and problems of women in the Austin area and shall recommend programs designed to alleviate any inequities that may confront women in social, economic and vocational pursuits.

Whereas in August 2016, the Austin Commission for Women passed recommendation 20160810-003A relating to the Austin Police Department (APD) DNA Lab Closure which called for additional resources to address the sexual assault kit (SAK) backlog. Additionally, the recommendation requested that the backlog be cleared in 3-4 years from October 1, 2016, and that all SAKs be fully processed within 60 days.

Whereas the Austin Commission for Women is grateful recommendation 20160810-003A was fully supported by the Austin City Council and resulted in swift and corrective actions by APD to prioritize its handling of sexual assault forensic evidence such that APD is on pace to clear the backlog by the end of 2018.

Whereas the Austin Commission for Women recognizes that clearing the sexual assault forensic evidence backlog is but a first step towards ensuring a holistic community response to sexual assault. Subsequently, as the SAK testing results come back by the hundreds, they become cases that need investigating and victims that need notifying and services.

Whereas the Austin Commission for Women holds firm in the belief that a holistic community response is made possible when investigators, victim services, prosecution, and other service providers have sufficient resources to respond. Otherwise, the Austin Commission for Women anticipates our community will end up with additional delays requiring cases to be triaged, which is neither victim-centered nor trauma-informed.

Whereas the Austin Commission has identified two pressing issues that must be addressed within this budget cycle to continue to ensure that our community's response to sexual assault is one that centers the experiences of survivors with dignity and respect:

1. Effective April 2017, The City of Austin and Travis County formed a joint work group to address the criminal justice issues relating to the Austin Police Department DNA Unit. Despite numerous requests from victim advocates and continued confusion and delay in notification to relevant stakeholders, no group representing the voice of those survivors of sexual assault, whose evidence makes up a large portion of the impacted DNA, has been appointed to this stakeholder group. **The Austin Commission for Women respectfully requests that representative(s) from The SAFE Alliance and/or any other appropriate victim-centered group be appointed as full voting member(s) of the joint work group by October 1, 2017, instead of solely in an advisory capacity where their decision-making authority would likely be limited.**
2. In the last year, APD has taken swift and corrective actions to process sexual assault forensic evidence in its possession and to notify victims about SAK testing results. However, the inadequate handling of evidence up to this point has resulted in months, years, and even decades of silence regarding a victim's sexual assault case. Failing to test the evidence that survivors have entrusted to us is failing to believe them and support them. Therefore, many victims who have not been afforded the opportunity to learn the outcome of the evidence after months, years and

even decades are understandably in need of trauma-informed counseling services upon being contacted by APD with news of their SAKs testing results.

- a. **The Austin Commission for Women respectfully requests \$50,000 be allocated for the express purpose of training local counselors within both the non-profit and private sectors to provide trauma counseling in exchange for their agreement to take an appropriate number of pro-bono sexual assault clients in need of these services.** With this funding, the city can train between 25-50 counselors who can be added to APD's Victim Services referral list within a 12-month period. Trainers would be certified by the EMDR International Association (EMDRIA). The estimated number of trained counselors is derived from the known range of \$1000 - \$1,500 for providing EMDRIA certified training. This approach has the added benefit of building community capacity beyond any one-time allocation to a specific city department or community-based organization.
- b. **In addition to building community capacity to address the counseling needs of sexual assault survivors, the Austin Commission for Women respectfully requests that the Victim Services Division of the Austin Police Department be restored to its optimal capacity.** Since 2006, APD Victims Services has lost a total of 10 counselors, which to date have only partially been restored by three temporary and four grant funded positions. This decrease in capacity means that not all victims have access to the vital services provided by this division; these services are considered best practice for sexual assault investigations. **The Austin Commission for Women respectfully requests all ten crisis response counselor positions be fully restored within one year and that additional full-time employees (FTEs) be allocated based on population increases since 2006.**

Whereas when our systems fail to serve victims of sexual assault with dignity and respect, we contribute to a culture where violence against women is tolerated. The Austin Commission for Women recognizes that many dedicated individuals and organizations are fiercely committed to improving our systems' responses to sexual assault, and that we must all collectively do better by our beloved city and its residents.

Therefore be it resolved that the Austin Commission for Women will be consulting with key stakeholders, including the Public Safety Commission, to develop specific funding requests to support these victim-centered responses to sexual assault. It is our sincere hope that we can enjoy the full support of the Austin City Council for these requests during this 2017-18 budget cycle.