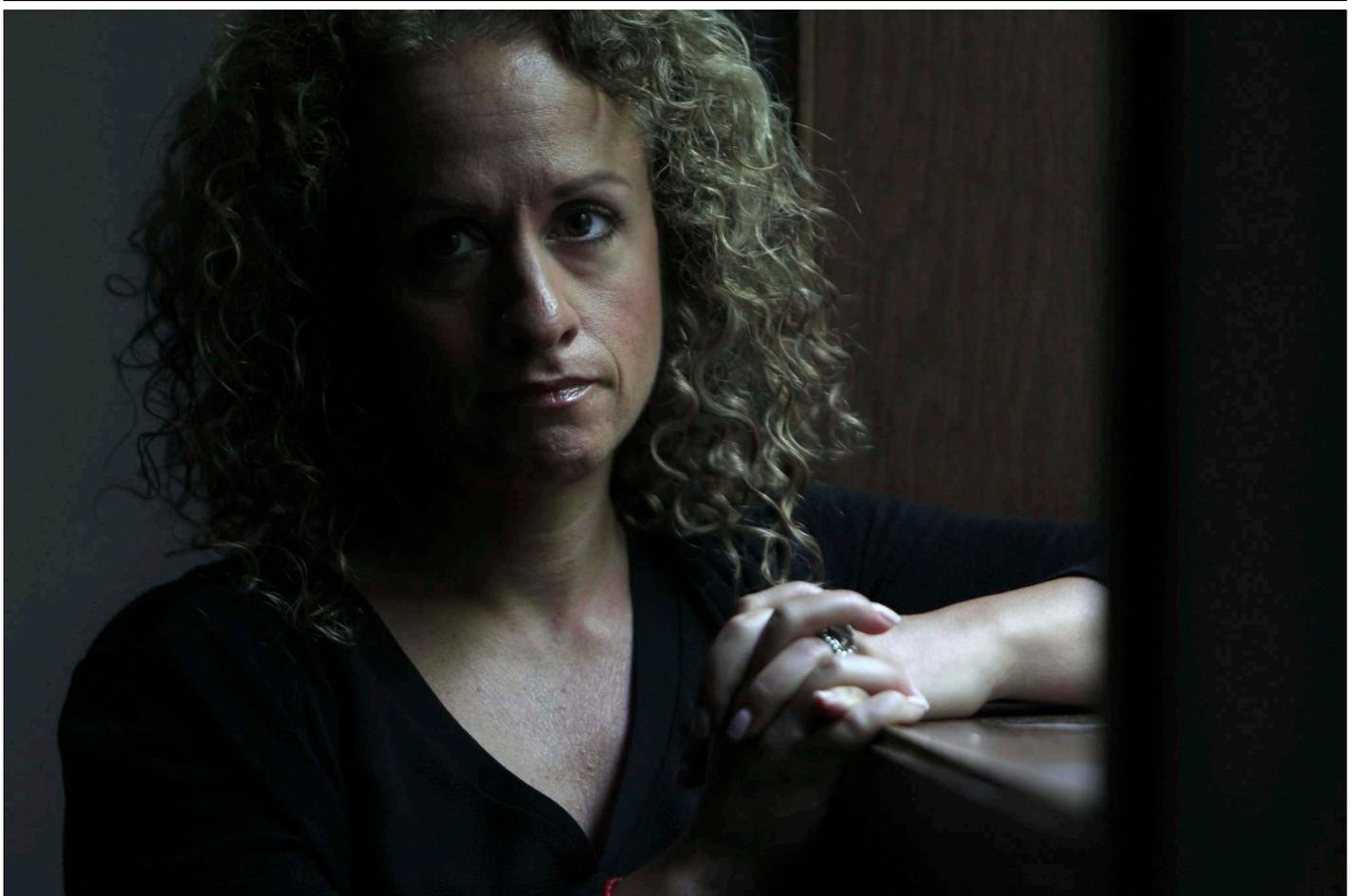


# Telling their stories, concealing their identities

## WINNIPEG SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR SEX-ASSAULT VICTIMS SEEKS TO REVIVE REPORT-SHARING WITH POLICE

By: Katie May

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Nadia LaRosa works with victims of abuse at Klinik

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A crisis-support program for victims of sexual assault is trying to revive anonymous report-sharing with Manitoba police.

Over the past two decades, the ability for victims to provide anonymous reports about what happened to them was seen by counsellors as a way to bridge the gap

between helping victims heal and aiding police investigations, especially for those who weren't ready to make a formal complaint to police.

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Klinic's sexual assault crisis program used to share the anonymous reports it received with police via the RCMP's Violent Crime Linkage System database. The idea was that investigators might still be able to use details from an anonymous report to help them investigate other sexual assaults — in the case of a serial rapist, for example. The practice is widely used in British Columbia, where police forces throughout the province have been accepting anonymous sexual-assault reports from community-based victim services organizations for the past nine years. More recently, police in Yukon also took up the practice.

"It was really to provide people who had been victimized by sexual assault with another option rather than involving the police in a formal way or not," said Nadia LaRosa, co-ordinator of Klinic's Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre who worked for many years in the sexual assault crisis program. The program's records show anonymous reports were accepted by police dating back to at least 1995.

"People could come in and report what happened to them and give as much or as little detail — it was up to them — and have that recorded. What we would do with that was we would keep a copy here and we would send a copy to the police for their information only.

"It was really giving people an opportunity to have someone hear their story, to have it reported somewhere, to have it held somewhere, and then if people chose to involve police at a later date, they still could," she added.

But the practice fell out of favour when police stopped using anonymous reports in the national database several years ago, amid concerns they were not detailed enough to be helpful to investigators, LaRosa said.

Now, the agency is trying to find a way to offer more detailed reports that still shield victims' identities and give police helpful information in a more "trauma-informed" way. Within the past year, Klinik began meeting with RCMP officials to work on revamping anonymous-report forms so it could be once again included in the Violent Crime Linkage System database.

A Manitoba RCMP spokeswoman said in an email to the *Free Press* that generally speaking, the RCMP still accepts third-party reports.

"We understand the victims don't always want to come forward. If we receive a name of a victim of sexual assault, we are obligated to speak with them. However, if a name is not provided to us, we still take the information and go as far as we can with that," Tara Seel wrote.

The Winnipeg Police Service confirmed anonymous sexual assault reporting has been proposed at inter-agency meetings with police officials and community groups, but said nothing has been formalized. WPS has a team of 14 officers in its sex crimes unit, all specially trained to investigate sexual assaults, and the police service has worked with community agencies to try to ensure women feel safe coming forward to police, Insp. Kelly Dennison said in a previous interview with the *Free Press*.

"We work well together (with community groups such as Klinik) so that women are coming forward and they're reporting that they're sexually assaulted. Then, we have the resources not just within the service but within the city to properly investigate those," Dennison said.

Meanwhile, few people are choosing to file anonymous reports, even as Klinik sees steady demand for its sexual assault counselling services and Manitoba maintains the highest rate of reported sexual assault of all the provinces. Klinik hasn't received any anonymous reports so far this year. It received four in 2016 and an average of three or four annually in recent years.

"We continue to take anonymous reports because for people it's still giving them an opportunity to do something with their story. To have somebody else witness it, to have it recorded somewhere, to have it kept somewhere safe. And that, even from a counselling perspective, can offer some help in the healing process," LaRosa said.

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*Read more by Katie May.*

## **ANONYMOUS SEXUAL-ASSAULT REPORTING IN CANADA**

Nine years ago, a Vancouver-based victim-services organization teamed up with the BC Association of Chiefs of Police to start an anonymous-reporting process for victims of sexual assault who didn't want to come forward to police. They knew the majority of victims didn't report their sexual assaults, and they were concerned about serial predators targeting vulnerable women in the province.

"It wasn't a hard sell," says Tracy Porteous, executive director of the Ending Violence Association of B.C., which proposed anonymous, third-party reporting to police.

Since then, an estimated 60 reports each year are received by victims services agencies in B.C., passed along to police forces throughout the province and entered into a province-wide police database. Information contained in anonymous reports has allowed police to continue investigating other serial sexual assault cases, and in at least two cases, guilty pleas were entered in court after victims who had submitted third-party reports agreed to speak to police following continued investigative efforts, Porteous said.

Considering that so few sexual-assault survivors want to speak to police, and many fear they won't be believed if they do, "It's incumbent on us to be as creative as possible to find ways for victims to come forward and get the support they need... and get pathways to justice," she said.

A third-party report is considered a middle-ground option for victims who don't want to take the traditional police-report route but still want to document what happened to them. Many, Porteous said, find the police process traumatizing, although she noted investigative techniques and sexual-violence training continues to improve.

Vancouver Police Department spokesman Sgt. Jason Robillard said the department takes third-party reports seriously but is still evaluating their effectiveness.

"We are grateful for them as we may not have received the information otherwise," he wrote in an email to the Free Press.

"We do however, have some challenges such as assessing the credibility of the complainant. This is a fairly new reporting technique and we are currently working out the process and policies regarding this."

To make a third-party report, victims must show up in person to a community-based victims services organization, which forwards it on to police minus any information that would identify the victim. The police don't investigate the anonymous report. They use the information it contains to help them with other sexual-assault investigations. In some cases, victims who submitted anonymous reports are later contacted through the victim services agency if the details in their report match up to another ongoing sexual assault investigation. Some victims who at first wanted to be anonymous choose to go through the court process when they find out there may be other victims, Porteous said.

Yukon introduced third-party reporting territory-wide nearly three years ago but it hasn't been widely adopted across Canada.