

Sexual assault kit payment bill passes Senate

BOISE — A bill to ensure that sexual assault victims aren't billed for the cost of forensic evidence collection has passed the Senate.

Current law instructs hospitals and justice centers to bill sexual assault victims' health insurance first for the cost of collecting a sexual assault kit, with Idaho's Crime Victims Compensation Program covering any costs that remain. Under HB 429, brought by Rep. Melissa Wintrow of Boise, the full cost of the forensic exam would automatically be covered by the CVCP.

Sexual assault is the only crime where victims are billed for forensic evidence collection, co-sponsor Sen. Shawn Keough told her fellow senators on the floor.

"We don't ask home invasion victims to cover the cost of dusting for fingerprints or the family of homicide victims to subsidize blood splatter analysis," Keough, a Republican from Sandpoint, said.

Twin Falls nonprofit Voices Against Violence was one of the organizations consulted in the drafting of the bill. Executive director Donna Graybill said she's seen current laws cause sexual assault survivors "a great deal of stress." Some survivors she's worked with have even had their credit damaged because of it, Graybill said.

"This has been a real gap in our system's response to sexual assault survivors," Graybill told the Times-News. "We're really happy to see [the bill's] success so far."

Only one lawmaker stood to debate the measure on the floor: Sen. Abby Lee, a Republican from Fruitland, who offered her support.

"This is not only about equity," Lee said. "This is about timeliness."

Lee pointed out that current law can be particularly problematic for young people who are still covered under their parents' insurance, since young victims who don't want their parents to know about their assault may be hesitant to undergo a forensic exam.

"These are crimes," Lee said. "And the ability to collect this evidence is critical in those first few hours after a crime of sexual assault."

The bill passed 67-1 in the House, where Rep. Vito Barbieri, R—Dalton Gardens, provided the only "no" vote. The Senate's 34-1 vote on Thursday also had a lone dissenter: Sen. Dan Foreman, a Republican from Moscow. He did not debate against the measure on the floor.

Because of a minor amendment made on the Senate side, the bill will now go back to the House.

###