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The NCHERM Group and ATIXA executive summary of the campus-based elements of the White House Announcement and report pertaining to “Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action”

On Wednesday, January 22, 2014, President Barack Obama shined a spotlight on sexual assault in America. In doing so, he specifically illuminated the nature and extent of sexual assault on college and university campuses. He pledged to work hand-in-hand with higher education and government leaders to help institutions better prevent and respond to incidents of campus-based sexual violence; the President announced the creation of a task force with those specific purposes. In concert with the April 4, 2011 Dear Colleague Letter and the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, which included the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (Campus SaVE), this “Renewed Call to Action” has elevated the issue of campus sexual assault to an unprecedented position of prominence – one that, we hope, will create the kind of change that impacts not just institutional responses and policies, but more importantly, prevention and education efforts.

Accompanying President Obama’s announcement was a report provided by The White House Council on Women and Girls and the Office of the Vice President of the United States entitled, “Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action.” Below is a Rapid Response summary of the campus-based aspects of the Report.

The Report addresses four major areas:

- **Campus Sexual Assault**
- Increasing Arrest, Prosecution and Conviction Rates
- Committing Vital Resources to Prevention and Response
- Changing Culture: Breaking the Cycle of Violence

The Report creates a “White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault” which aims to:

- Provide educational institutions with best practices for preventing and responding to rape and sexual assault.
- Build on the federal government’s enforcement efforts to ensure that educational institutions comply fully with their legal obligations.
- Improve transparency of the government’s enforcement activities.
- Increase the public’s awareness of an institution’s track record in addressing rape and sexual assault.
- Enhance coordination among federal agencies to hold schools accountable if they do not confront sexual violence on their campuses. (see p. 5)
In addition, the report recognizes the multi-faceted nature of any endeavor to prevent and respond to issues of sexual assault on college campuses: “To make our campuses safer, change needs to come from many quarters:

- Schools must adopt **better policies and practices** to **prevent** these crimes and to **more effectively respond** when they happen – both by **holding offenders accountable** and giving victims the help they need to **physically and emotionally recover**. (emphasis added)
- Federal agencies must better ensure that schools are living up to their obligations.” (p. 33)

The nature of the problem on college campuses is also a focal point for the Report, showing the government’s recognition of some of the more unique issues pertaining to sexual assault at colleges and universities:

- The dynamics of college life appear to fuel the problem, as many victims are abused while they’re drunk, under the influence of drugs, passed out, or otherwise incapacitated.
- Most college victims are assaulted by someone they know – and parties are often the site of these crimes.
- College sexual assault survivors suffer from high levels of mental health problems (like depression and PTSD) and drug and alcohol abuse.
- Reporting rates are also particularly low. (p. 2)

Also citing a need to better correlate governmental oversight and accountability efforts, the Report contains macro-level guideposts for institutions seeking compliance. These guideposts summarize the intention of the Office for Civil Rights’ recent Resolution Agreements with institutions to help colleges and universities target compliance areas. OCR Resolution Agreements strive to help campuses develop:

- Comprehensive plans for educating students and employees about sexual assault;
- Policies and practices for responding to allegations of sexual violence;
- Adequate training for school officials charged with responding to complaints; and
- Policies to ensure that survivors are given the remedies and resources they need to continue their educations. (see p. 25)

As institutions address the complexity of sexual assault in the college environment, we at The NCHERM Group and ATIXA feel it is crucial for campuses to elevate the discussion to target more than policy and procedure; it is imperative to target prevention and education. Doing so will fulfill not just the letter, but also the spirit of the President’s announcement by helping to make our campuses safer.

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