



OPINION: Let's make sexual assault an election issue

For: Local Xpress

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May 12, 2017

804 words

Sexualized violence is a serious health, social, systemic, legal and public safety issue in Nova Scotia. Therefore, sexualized violence is an election issue.

Sexual assault levels in Nova Scotia are significantly higher than the national average. Sexualized violence impacts every voter in our province: victims, friends, families, and co-workers. Me and you. It is an issue that we need to hear candidates addressing on the campaign trail as we all try to figure out who we want to elect on May 30.

The Avalon Sexual Assault Centre (Avalon) is a non-profit, community-based, feminist organization working to eliminate sexual assault/abuse, and to change the current socio-political culture that fosters sexism, social injustice and other forms of oppression. Avalon has been at the forefront of direct service delivery, social justice advocacy, education, professional training and support for victims and survivors of sexualized violence since 1983. We are the only sexual assault centre in HRM and the longest running full-spectrum sexual assault centre in Nova Scotia.

"When I went to Avalon they believed me the moment I sat in the chair," a childhood sexual abuse survivor recently told us. "I was relieved of my burden of 20 to 30 years, They [the counselors] helped me find myself that was so hidden, I didn't even know who I was. I am now living a full life and am proud of who I am now and what I came through," she said.

It's stories like these that we hear at Avalon every day that drive us forward, and keep reminding us that our work striving for a society free of sexualized violence is far from complete. A provincial government that stands with us all in publicly condemning sexual assault and commits to addressing it is so vital.

Community members have also identified that sexualized violence is an important issue and they want clarity from each political party around their policy and funding plans to address the unacceptably high rates of sexual assault in our province. Here's what we know:

- Under Stephen McNeil, the governing Liberals introduced a Sexual Violence Strategy in 2015. It's a step forward but it, combined with a rash of high-profile sexual assault stories in the news, has created increased demand on Avalon for our services and a need for more resources. The Liberal government has not articulated whether they will renew the strategy or take other action to address sexualized violence in the event that they are re-elected

- The NDP announced on March 6 that if elected, they will pass legislation on campus sexual assault that will require schools to have sexual assault complaint procedures, education and prevention programs, and 24/hour day support services for survivors. The NDP committed multi-year funding for sexual assault centres and services, and \$2 million to prevention and addressing sexualized violence. An additional \$500,000 was promised to Nova Scotia's women's centres, which provide prevention and support programs; and \$1 million to immediately double the number of sexual assault therapists available across the province.
- PC Party leader Jamie Baillie has committed to requiring post-secondary institutions to develop comprehensive sexualized violence strategies. The PC party says they would pass the Dignity for Victims of Sexual Violence Act that enables survivors to access legal representation. The party also says they would require provincial court judges to complete ongoing education in sexual assault law. Furthermore, they have stated they would restore the Liberal cut to the Boots on the Street Program, which puts more officers into the community.
- The Green party has committed to a provincial strategy for addressing sexualized violence and advocates a proportionally representative electoral system. They say they are committed to balancing their party with male/female representation. Another focus for the Green party is to institute a basic living income to alleviate poverty and the issues of abuse that often stem from poverty.

Avalon knows that incidents of sexualized violence are under-reported in our province and that there are inadequate support services due to limited resources, stigma and systemic barriers within the criminal justice process.

Sexualized violence impacts us all. If you have the chance to speak to a candidate in your constituency here are some things you can ask them:

1. How does your party plan to address sexualized violence in Nova Scotia?
2. What will your party do to ensure sexual assault services like those provided at Avalon Sexual Assault Centre have long-term, sustainable funding/secure futures?
3. How would your party ensure that victims of sexualized violence have the services they need to heal?

For a more complete list of questions, refer to our [Facebook page](#) and [website](#).

Let's stand together and show that Nova Scotians identify sexualized violence as a key election issue and we're ready for social action and systemic change. Voice your support by posting to Facebook or Twitter using the hashtags #StandWithVictims, #NSVotes and #NSPoli.