

ing with Hilltop to make services more reliable and readily available to serve the community.

EXISTING SERVICES

An organization based in Grand Junction with a regional office in Montrose, Hilltop provides advocacy resources for domestic-violence and sexual-assault victims in Ouray, Montrose and Delta counties.

Services are provided to Ouray County in the form of a crisis line, access to safe houses and a mobile advocacy program, according to Kaye Hotsenpiller, senior director of regional services for Hilltop.

Hotsenpiller — who is married to 7th Judicial District Attorney Dan Hotsenpiller — said the organization has been looking for ways to consistently serve Ouray County.

“It kind of has evolved over time and our numbers have not continued to increase,” she said about the need in Ouray County. “So we have kind of created this mobile advocacy program.”

The mobile program consists of three advocates, one of whom is bilingual, and covers the wide expanse of the three counties.

There are no other community-based victim’s advocacy services in Ouray County.

HARD TO REACH?

While Hilltop provides resources to victims, some say they haven’t always been reliable.

“There is so much that has fallen through the cracks because there was no one there,” Williamson said about her experience working with Hilltop.

That’s because Williamson’s daughter lost her Hilltop-assigned advocate before her case was resolved. She was told it was due to her advocate’s heavy caseload.

Before leaving the case, the advocate was increasingly “hard to get in touch with,” according to Williamson.

A new advocate was assigned to the case, but Williamson said the replacement did not reach out to her.

“I called him a couple of days before our court date, and I emailed and said ‘I understand you are now my advocate, will you be there in court with us?’” she said.

According to Williamson, she did not hear from Hilltop until a few days after the court date passed. Williamson said the reason she was given was that her second advocate had moved out of his position and was no longer working on the case.

Williamson said having an advocate that day would have helped her make better decisions in court.

Toth also experienced problems with her own advocate situation. She was given an advocate, then assigned a new advocate who was eventually taken off the case. She was then returned to her old advocate.

Toth said communication with Hilltop about the changes

didn’t go well.

“I wasn’t notified that (my new advocate) was gone,” she said. “...It’s not like they said, ‘She is no longer with Hilltop.’”

In general, Toth said Hilltop has been difficult to work with.

“I keep reaching out to services because they are there and that is what they are supposed to do, but in a lot of instances I find myself advocating for myself,” she said.

NEW TEAM

The aforementioned incidents and a general community concern for victims of sexual assault led to the creation of the Victim Advocate Support Team (VAST).

VAST is a fledgling group that originated from a women’s rights policy tracking division of D3 Indivisible, a Ridgway-based organization that promotes a progressive political platform.

VAST member Kate Kissingford said that apart from victims (she prefers to call them survivors) losing their advocates, she’s also heard that it has been difficult to connect with Hilltop services in general.

“Just even getting on the phone and getting funneled to the right resource has been tricky at times for people,” she said. “They are either misdirected, or just making the contact and the connections with the services has not always been a smooth process.”

However, Kissingford believes that Hilltop does do a lot of good work for the region.

“It is important to note that we are hearing the situations where it has not been successful, but there are a lot of situations where Hilltop has been successful,” she said.

“...These people are doing this because they care. This is not a high-paying situation; this is a labor of service. I think that sometimes gets lost in the complaint process.”

Hotsenpiller said clients who are unhappy with the service can complete a grievance procedure and stated that the Domestic Violence Services program also has a licensed social worker who monitors the program.

“This person ensures that we are providing quality services to anyone that comes through the door,” she said.

“...The bottom line is we are not perfect, we make mistakes, and we are always looking at ways to improve our services. If a complaint comes to us, we will address it.”

MOVING FORWARD

VAST has been meeting with a Hilltop representative toward the goal of making the availability of the organization’s services more visible in the community.

That’s because another common complaint about Hilltop has been that Ouray residents aren’t even aware their services exist due to a lack of marketing in the region.

Toth believes if more mem-

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Ouray County Sheriff Dominic Mattivi, Ouray Police Chief Justin Perry and Ridgway Town Marshal Tammy Stroup discuss sexual-assault advocacy issues during a July meeting at Ridgway Town Hall. (Photo by Tanya Ishikawa/Watch Contributor)

Ouray County sexual-assault cases winding through judicial system

By **JUSTIN CRIADO**
Senior Staff Writer

Since 2015, five sexual-assault cases with Ouray County connections have been making their way through the criminal-justice system. Three of the alleged incidents feature former area officials, including former Ridgway Assistant Fire Chief Travis Buck, former Ridgway Planning Commission Chairman Brian Scranton, and former business owner and veterinarian Joseph Alaimo.

Buck entered a plea agreement Aug. 31 on a “sexual assault with a 10-year age difference” charge, and was sentenced to 18 months of unsupervised probation. The charge will be dismissed if Buck successfully fulfills all plea agreement requirements, including registering as a sex offender and not being around children under the age of 18 (other than his own). Jail time is a possibility if Buck doesn’t fully comply.

At the hearing, the underage victim’s mother said her daughter had been “manipulated” by Buck, according to a Ouray County Plaindealer article in the Sept. 7-13, 2017, edition.

“She’s so well manipulated, she doesn’t feel she was victimized,” the mother said during the hearing. “Do not downplay the severity of this crime.”

In the case of Scranton, the trial was rescheduled earlier this month to Jan. 28, 2018. Scranton has pleaded not guilty to the charges: one count of sexual assault as a Class 3 felony and one count of sexual assault as a Class 4 felony. The allegations stem from a May 2015 incident in which a woman claims she was sexually assaulted during a party at his house.

Alaimo — who moved to Pennsylvania after closing his Ouray County business, Trail Town Still, in December 2015 — has been charged with second-degree assault/drugging a victim, sexual assault/victim incapable of appraising conditions and sexual assault on a helpless victim.

There are two alleged victims in the case, including one whom Alaimo allegedly sexually assaulted during a May 2015 incident at his former business.

Alaimo’s trial is expected to be scheduled during an Oct. 2 court hearing.

In another case, a sex-sting operation earlier this year resulted in five arrests, including four Montrose residents and one Ouray County local. Daniel Leonardi, of Ouray County, was charged with criminal attempt, internet luring, solicitation of child prostitution, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, patronizing a child prostitute and pandering of a child, the Plaindealer has reported.

Another Ouray County-related case resulting from the sting operation involves Montrose resident Nicholas Love — who was formerly employed as a Ridgway School District custodian. Love has been charged with attempted sex assault on a child and internet luring of a child with intent to exploit, among several other charges.

Both cases are at different stages in the court system.

The sting which led to Love and Leonardi’s arrest was organized by the Montrose Police Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Colorado Bureau of Investigation, Colorado State Patrol, Montrose County Sheriff’s Office, Delta

County Sheriff’s Office, Delta Police Department and 7th Judicial District Attorney’s Office.

Following community scrutiny surrounding the cases, Ouray County law-enforcement officials, including Sheriff Dominic Mattivi and Chief Justin Perry, organized a public meeting in July regarding advocacy resources available to victims.

Perry, who also is Ouray’s interim city administrator, told *The Watch* that the county will receive more than \$40,000 in a Victim Assistance and Law Enforcement grant to fund a part-time victim’s advocate and victim’s services program in 2018.

“It’s really going to be an incredible program,” Perry said. “I’m excited for it. The resource is going to be awesome.”

The advocate and program will be for all law-enforcement agencies in the county, Perry added. For the past four years, Perry has secured funds to support a victim’s service program. He said his department has received “excellent feedback” about the program.

“It’s one of the most critical and important services we can provide and we can have in our police department and our county,” he said.

A part-time advocate was last available in 2015. For the past two years, it’s been more of an on-call service, Perry explained. When Perry joined the department in 2013, there was no such program, he said.

Law-enforcement agencies aren’t required to have an advocate under the state’s Victim Rights Act, but must provide victims with information about community services, such as applicable protection and assistance resources. A full list of crime victim rights can be viewed on the state’s official website (colorado.gov) under the Department of Public Safety Division of Criminal Justice section.

Sherry McKenzie, public information officer of the 7th Judicial District Attorney’s Office, said the office and District Attorney Dan Hotsenpiller are aware of the cases, but declined to provide any further details. She added that all cases that are brought to the office’s attention are done so by local “law-enforcement partners.”

“We will not have knowledge of any unreported cases or cases that may be under investigation by a law-enforcement agency,” she said.

When asked if the office would participate in community outreach efforts regarding sexual assault, McKenzie did not comment.

Ridgway resident and sexual-assault victim Heather Toth has continually spoken out in support of better advocacy for victims in Ouray County.

She’s also publicly supported the alleged victims in the Alaimo case.

“There are several components required to combat sexual assault and challenges that accompany these crimes,” she wrote in a letter to the editor for the May 4-10, 2017, issue of the Ouray County Plaindealer. “Community education, law-enforcement training and emotional support for the victims are just a few of these components. Halting victim blaming and believing victims is another.”

Watch Contributor Tanya Ishikawa assisted with this story.