

Survivors, Community Members Speak Out For Victims Of Abuse

by Dalton Brown, News Reporter
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ALTON - An urgent need in the Alton community came to light during the public comment portion of Thursday night's Alton City Council meeting. Concerned citizens

spoke passionately on behalf - and from the perspective - of survivors of sexual and physical abuse, raising concerns that other victims may not know how or where to begin seeking help.

Lifelong Godfrey resident Megan Cosgriff said she knows firsthand how hard it can be to speak out.

“There’s been a lot of discussion in this community about reporting abuse to the appropriate legal authorities,” Cosgriff said. “I’m here to tell you how difficult that is - I am unfortunately an expert on this topic, and I’d like to tell you why.”

She then directed her comments directly towards Mayor David Goins, who she explained was her D.A.R.E. teacher about 30 years ago and was a “pivotal influence” in her life. She credited him with telling her she was a “good kid,” even when she believed otherwise about herself.

She then shared her own personal experiences with abusive relationships, substance abuse, and attempted suicide, adding her “biggest mistake” in life was not telling a trusted adult like Goins or her father sooner.

“I don’t need that now - I don’t need anyone to help me - but I’m afraid that there are girls in this community that might need your help, sir,” she said to Goins. “I’m trying to point out to them that I will listen and hear them. I have heard them, I know one of them. I believe her.

“I’m here to let them know: if they need my help, I will help them - and I know you will help them too, sir.”

Cory Davenport, a former reporter for local news outlets including Riverbender.com, said more education and awareness is needed for youth victims of abuse to know what resources are available from local authorities.

“I think that minors in this city need more education about what the police can do for them,” he said. “I think they need to know more about the different text hotlines, the different call hotlines, and what grooming looks like.”

The Alton Police Department offers an Anonymous Tip Hotline at (618) 465-5948. Callers can remain anonymous and “leave information on a recorded voice mail system,” according to the City of Alton [website](http://www.altonil.com), which also provides more information about the hotline and other ways to report a crime.

Additional resources are available if you or someone you know wishes to report abuse, including the following:

- Madison County Rape Hotline: (618) 452-2763
- Department of Human Services (DHS) Sexual Help Hotline: (618) 397-0975
- Illinois Call4Calm Text Line: Text "TALK" to 552020
- Crisis Text Line: Text "TALK" to 741741

Davenport then said Goins and Alton Police Chief Jarrett Ford could work together with the Alton School District to “ensure that young people in this community have the ability, the confidence, and the know-how to approach police and even their parents and trusted adults about abuse and grooming.” He also requested a “crackdown” on local businesses selling age-regulated items such as alcohol and tobacco illegally to minors.

Megan Weller said that while she lives in Alton and loves the city, she’s concerned for her children in the Alton School District and said she may have to move away due to safety issues. She cited the [fights that broke out at Alton High School](#) last year and the [fatal shooting](#) of 13-year-old Raniya Steward in February.

Weller said she’s also concerned about local shops selling age-regulated items to minors, and that city officials should take action to make underage victims of abuse aware of their options. She also raised concerns about a lack of community trust in the Alton Police Department, to which Ford replied he encourages victims and anyone with knowledge of abuse occurring to report it.

“If you are a victim or know of one, I would absolutely encourage you to come and ... report it to me personally or the police department,” Ford said. “I know it’s tough ... I understand that - I can’t relate to it because I’ve never been in that position, but I can understand it. But I also know coming from my position, if it doesn’t get reported to us, there’s nothing we could attempt to try to help and do.

“I will tell you this: if you are a victim and you want to come report that, I will do everything we can to investigate it thoroughly, and if there’s enough evidence to charge that crime, we will present that to the State’s Attorney’s office to hold people accountable,” Ford said.

The chief also said the department is aware of an Alton business which has failed yearly compliance checks regarding the illegal sale of age-regulated items to minors who did not present identification, but said they have already “charged the people and held them accountable.”

Amy McMillan was the final public speaker to address the topic of abuse, describing herself as a survivor of sex trafficking who has since created a “safe haven” for other survivors of abuse. She said she reported her abuser, an Alton business owner, to the police “dozens of times” over the past 10 years and was ignored.

“What if I told you I was brave enough back then and I’m still standing strong, but nobody listened?” McMillan asked. “The problem here at hand isn’t people speaking up, because there has been people speaking up for decades, that’s not the problem. There’s something else going on here, much bigger.

“If your city is important to you, save the children that are your future of this city. These are the children that are going to be taking care of you guys one day. They are our priority.”

Alderman Raymond Strebel thanked each of the public speakers, but added that any concerns raised and ignored 10 or more years ago were done so under a different city staff and administration. Strebel said he has “every confidence” that Ford will respond to any concerns brought to him.

Alderwoman Betsy Allen thanked “each and every one” of the public speakers, adding they were “brave.” Mayor David Goins also thanked the speakers and assured them city officials would follow up with each of them after the meeting.

A recording of the March 14, 2024 Alton City Council meeting featuring all public comments in full is available at the top of this story, on the [Riverbender.com Facebook page](#), or on [Riverbender.com/video](#).