



## **Transcript of meeting: Saturday, September 15, 2018**

*This is an edited version of the transcription projected on the screen during the meeting. The transcriber used the "TypeWell" method synthesizing the essence of the discussion using advanced abbreviated software. Thus, the following is not necessarily verbatim.*

*Kyle Roe transcribed. Bert Lederer edited.*

### **Presenter: Blanca Ortega, Prevention Education Specialist Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services**

Mike Sweeney, Chapter President: Before Blanca's presentation, I will read a statement from our Executive Committee.

*"Our September program was changed to address a sexual harassment problem that has come up for some members of the group. To be as transparent as possible the Executive Committee members thought it was important to let you know what has happened and what we have done so far to prevent any more incidents.*

*"To protect the privacy of the victims and accused we will not divulge names or specifics...we received a complaint of inappropriate touching by a member that happened after (one of) our meeting(s).*

*"At the same time, we became aware of more incidents by that same member that some other women of the group have experienced. We immediately called a(n Executive Committee) meeting to address the issues.*

*"Once the issues were identified and known to our E(xecutive) C(ommittee) members, we contacted Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services. Here are some actions we have taken.*

*"We made sure that the victims knew that they did the right thing, the brave thing, in reporting the incidents. We let them know that counseling was available to them. Some have pursued this.*

*"We have asked the member not to return. We were advised to contact the police, which we did. No charges have been filed at the request of the victims.*

*“We met with the member and heard (that person’s) side of the story. The instigator understands the reason for the suspension and will not attend any HLAA functions. We advised (the instigator) to get counseling. It was suggested that we have a (chapter) meeting talking about personal safety.*

*“We are hoping that this meeting will get us all advice and food for thought in dealing with sexual harassment or unacceptable touch. We have an excellent speaker today in Blanca Ortega who will talk to us about these issues and give us other information.”*

Blanca: Thank you! Good morning everyone. I am Blanca Ortega, I work for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services. My role with DVSAS is prevention and community training. Today I am going to be talking to you all about your rights and being safe. Not only for yourself but also for friends and family members who might go through some of these issues.

I will go ahead and stop periodically to see if anyone has questions, comments or concerns that I might be able to clarify. I am aware that these topics are very sensitive and at times can be hard to listen to. If any of you feel you need to step out of the room because you are not comfortable with the information, please take care of yourselves. I will not be offended.

If you would like to talk after the presentation I can stay and speak with people who weren't comfortable asking questions during the presentation.

I will tell you a bit about myself. I am originally from Las Cruces NM, born and raised. My family moved to Washington three years ago. I am still getting used to the rain and the clouds. I do not like cold weather. However, it is a perfect excuse to drink coffee constantly. I love coffee.

I have an 11-year-old boy who is in his first year in middle school. Big milestone. I also have a 10-month-old baby girl. She is getting ready to walk. Another big milestone. My husband works for Customs And Border Protection in Lynden. If you frequent Canada and go through Lynden, you might have seen him. He looks intimidating, but he is a sweet heart.

I have a brother and sister, but I am the oldest. My parents and they all live in Las Cruces. It is a great excuse to get out of the rain.

Before we talk about any specifics we need to have a clear understanding of what sexual assault and sexual harassment is.

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact. A lot of people when they hear sexual assault automatically think of unwanted sex or rape. This is part of sexual assault but not the only type of sexual assault out there.

Sexual harassment is part of sexual assault. It is underneath the umbrella of sexual assault.

Sexual harassment is a deliberate or repeated sexual behavior that is not welcome and not asked for.

We are going to break this down and make it more understandable.

Sexual assault as we mentioned is any unwanted sexual contact. We have some examples of what sexual assault could look like. I would like to make this clear that these are not the only types of sexual assault, but these are the most common - rape, sexual intercourse against a person's will and forcible sodomy.

Marital rape. A lot of people believe that when you get married you agree to have intercourse with your partner forever. When it comes to sexual activity you need to have consent every time. It is your right to withdraw consent at any point in time. We will cover consent a little more.

Unwanted sexual touching. Sexual contact with minors, whether consensual or not. There is a law in Washington that protects our minors.

Incest is another type of sexual assault. Also, any unwanted or forced sexual contact.

Do you all know what coerced means?

Coercion is being talked in to something you don't want to do. You are talked in to saying yes through pressure. This is not consent.

Now let's talk about sexual harassment. It is repeated sexual behavior that is not welcome and not asked for. It is a repetition of behaviors. There are different types of sexual harassment.

You have nonverbal sexual harassment. Looking up and down a person's body. Kids today call this "checking them out."

Derogatory gestures or focal expressions of a sexual nature that are unasked for.

Following a person can constitute sexual harassment.

We have visual sexual harassment that are posters, drawings, pictures, screensavers, emails or text of a sexual nature. Being forced to see these things when it makes you uncomfortable falls under harassment.

There is verbal or written harassment. Comments on clothing, personal behavior or a person's body. Catcalling. Making fun of a preferred orientation or gender. Sexual jokes.

In our society today, it is hard to identify sexual harassment, especially of the verbal manner because we hear this daily. Even as a joke. It is everywhere. Our kids see it everywhere, hear it

everywhere and it is hard to identify.

The important thing with harassment and assault is that if it makes you uncomfortable you have the right to say something about it.

Requesting sexual favors or repeatedly asking someone out after they have expressed that they wouldn't like to go out.

Telling rumors about a person's personal or sexual life. Threatening a person or sending emails of a sexual nature.

A lot of people do like to communicate with their significant other via text message. Some of the pictures that are shared are explicit. What needs to be clear is that if you and your partner agree to share these it is between the both of you. You are not being forced into engaging in this conversation or your partner isn't being forced.

On top of that there needs to be an understanding that these conversations are going to be kept confidential, between the two of you. That is the agreement. Once a partner threatens to send or expose those pictures it is sexual harassment and can lead to sexual assault.

Any questions?

Speaker: You said the word "cat calling", can you define it?

Blanca: Yes. I don't have a solid definition. I can give you an example. Let's say a person is walking down the street and someone whistles at them. Or yells, "Sexy." Unwanted comments as someone walks down the street and is present without engaging the individual. That is an example.

Physical sexual harassment can be assault. As I mentioned sexual harassment can lead to assault. Impeding or blocking movement. If a person is trying to get out of a situation and someone prevents them from leaving in any shape or form, if it is a sexual nature it can be harassment.

Inappropriate touching of a person or a person's clothing. Even if they don't say anything. A lot of aggressors take refuge under the comment, "(S/he) didn't say no." Our response is asking if they said yes.

Consent should be viewed as "yes is yes," everything else is a "no."

Touching over a person's clothing can still be harassment. It can be a hug. Do you hug your friends? That's normal! That's natural! But when a person hugs you to the point that it makes you uncomfortable, maybe caressing your back or the hands are too low for your comfort, if it makes you uncomfortable then that is where the line is drawn.

The other person should respect that. If we express not liking a type of hugging that needs to be respected. Everyone has a different level of comfort and it is very important that you know what you are comfortable with. That is where the line is drawn.

Mike: Will you give us a little advice on how to prevent some of this stuff, especially this hugging like how to tell someone that something is unwanted.

Blanca: This is hard! Especially if it is someone you care for. It is hard to say no or express otherwise that you are uncomfortable. This is a normal feeling. However, there are some ways. I mentioned before that everyone is different. Some people might not be comfortable doing things and others are.

The first thing is being aware of your own boundaries. What do you like? What don't you like? Identify and try to prevent this from happening. Next you need to express this in any shape or form.

Maybe this is closing up when they hug you, or pushing them away, resistance. If you can't verbally express it. Or if you can verbally express, it's say something like, "I don't feel comfortable with that." It is important to remember that this responsibility, the responsibility of prevention, doesn't fall just on the survivor. It must go both ways.

Abusers are making a choice. Have you heard stories of sexual assault or harassment and you have heard people say comments like, "Why were they there?" or "What were they wearing?" or "Why were they drinking?"

Have you heard of this? Maybe we are even guilty of thinking of that. But we live in a victim blaming society. When it comes to sexual assault or sexual harassment or dating violence or domestic violence, it is never the victim's fault. The abuser is making a choice. The definition of sexual harassment says it clearly - this is a deliberate action. They know what they are doing.

Responsibility must fall on the abuser. Whether they respect our wishes or not. Nobody knows. But there are things and resources that are available to survivors to help cope and continue to move on with their lives after such things have happened to them. Or maybe they have witnessed it. Sexual harassment or assault affect the victim and everyone around them. That is secondary surviving. At DVSA we help with secondary survivors as well.

Another step to prevention is what Mike, Joyce and Pam have taken. Bringing people here and educating the community about what sexual assault and sexual harassment are. People often don't know what this is and don't have all the information.

As a community you can be aware of those victim blaming statements. You can reassure or correct people. It isn't their fault, they didn't ask for any of this to happen. The abuser made a choice.

There are quite a few things we can do in regard to prevention. Especially when it comes to us. The number one thing to be aware of is your own comfort level. What I feel comfortable with is not the same thing as what Joyce is comfortable with. We need to be aware of ourselves. We need to know that we have help.

DVSAS is not just for survivors or secondary survivors. It is for anyone who wants to know more about the topic.

Mike: Do you have a program for perpetrators?

Blanca: At DVSAS we don't have programs for the instigators or abusers, but we do have resources for them to go get help. We have access to perpetrator programs. Maybe support groups for them. We don't host them at DVSAS, but we know people in the community who do. We refer them to those agencies.

We have help for everyone. This includes teens. I thought I would throw that out there.

The last part of physical sexual harassment, unwanted kissing and hugging. Patting. Stroking. Know your comfort levels.

A lot of comments that we receive at DVSAS is "how do we identify an abuser?" How do you know that someone is abusive?

When it comes to these crimes they are all about power and control over another individual. It is a little blurry, but this particular wheel can be found online quite easily if you have access to a computer or a friend who has access. Just look up "power and control wheel" and this will pop up. (Ed. Note: an example is [http://www.ncdsv.org/publications\\_wheel.html](http://www.ncdsv.org/publications_wheel.html).)

This wheel has behaviors that abusive partners or abusive people demonstrate to obtain power and control over another person. This includes taking advantage of a person that might have a disability.

A lot of people will take advantage of that fact, they look for people who are vulnerable. Also, vulnerable can apply to the age, an adult with a teen is taking advantage of a vulnerable person. So being able to find out what weaknesses a person has and using them against them. As I mentioned this wheel has a lot of examples of those behaviors.

Any type of sexual activity requires consent. Consent needs to be clear, definite and voluntary. I highlight **voluntary agreement** to really emphasize the idea of coercion, doing something you don't want to do.

This can be verbal or physical consent. Earlier I asked how many of you hug your friends and family. Do you ask permission? How do you know they want to hug?

Mike: Sometimes it is body language or something you are used to. I don't know.

Joyce: I ask my grandchildren if I can give them a hug. I don't think to do that for adults.

Blanca: Well it is all about body language. It is natural. If you don't feel resistance or if you open your arms for a hug, that is nonverbal consent. They come towards you, they hug you. That is clear. That is a clear consent. Both people are agreeing to that hug. Both people are agreeing to that kiss if you lean in and they move back, are they giving consent? No! We need to respect that.

So that is what consent is. A voluntary agreement. It is clear. A lot of parents are practicing consent with their kids. They ask, "can I give you a hug?" I don't know about you all or if you have children or grandchildren. I love tickling my kids! If they say no or stop then I stop.

There are other ways that we can teach consent, especially to our youth and respecting their decisions.

So, as I mentioned a clear yes, verbal or otherwise, is needed.

As I touched briefly, the absence of a "no" does not make it a "yes." Yes means yes, everything else means no. It is catchy and easy to remember. It is easy to spread that message.

Here are your rights. You all have the right to be safe. You all have the right to feel safe in any environment you are in and with the people around you. You have the right to access services. There are many services available in Whatcom County. DVSAS is one of these services.

You have the right to give and withdraw consent at any time. Consent is needed every time before any type of activity especially sexual activity. Just because you said yes once does not mean you have said yes to all future actions.

Mike: A reminder that people came forward in our group. It seems like they got unwanted advances from this person. Then they wanted to stop these advances. I think in their mind they had to think of how they would do this. This person is used to doing what he does, and they don't want it anymore.

Blanca: This is a common mentality to think this. It goes back to the way and messages we receive in society. Once you say yes, it is not a yes forever.

I am pretty sure that a lot of you here did not know or even think about getting consent every single time. Now you do. This is a step towards prevention and spreading that message out to friends and family and acquaintances. People in general. When it comes to consent, it needs to happen every time.

Also, you have the right to withdraw consent. It is not a binding contract. You can have things stop whenever it is you feel uncomfortable. That is your right, your right to be safe.

A lot of abusers will not take responsibility for their actions. That is another way that you might be able to identify an abuser. They will always find an excuse for their behavior. Things such as, "Well they didn't say no." That is an excuse.

Or you will hear, "I was drinking, I don't know what I was doing" or "I was high on drugs, I didn't know what I was doing" or " Well they were smiling at me so I took that as a 'come get me'" They won't accept responsibility for their behavior. They will find an excuse.

So being aware of these things. Especially when it comes to sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a repeated set of offenses. How often has this happened? Asking yourself these questions.

Do I feel comfortable with this? Are they taking responsibility or blaming me? Abusers will do this. "If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have acted this way." If you hadn't smiled they wouldn't have done this to you.

So, it is ownership of behavior. Being aware of those.

Joyce: Don't some abusers say that they accidentally did something?

Blanca: Yes! That is an excuse. They didn't mean to touch. But they did touch, and you are communicating that it makes you uncomfortable. It is not their responsibility to abide by those wishes. They need to respect the answer you have given. That is another major difference between sexual harassment and sexual assault.

With sexual assault this is something that can only happen once or a number of times. It can be very confusing to Google laws on sexual assault and sexual harassment. The legal jargon is confusing. But it gives specific definitions of what constitutes under each one. The main one is that sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact and sexual harassment is a deliberate and repeated offense.

Speaker: Our society seems permissive or -- well old boundaries of language and dress, you can get a wide variety. But the point is the abuser is making a deliberate action.

Blanca: A choice.

Speaker: So, they will advertise to everyone that a car, if you buy this car, it makes you sexy. So -- well -- I am just saying that advertising and things like that and even I go to my local supermarket and I am surprised that some of the lack of clothing that people wear. It registers. It is as little material as you can buy. We need to have societal standards, but they are wide open, and you must make your own choice.

Maybe a definition of modesty or moderation. People must find it themselves.

Blanca: Well I see where you are coming from. Thank you for that comment. I am pretty sure that a lot of us in here share that same mental process. I am not going to lie, I share that one too. Especially now that I have a daughter. All those things come to mind.

However, the way I view this is "what if my family and I were living in Florida" for example. Beach everywhere. Females walking in bikinis and men without shirts. It is viewed as a normal way of dress. I think that there is research that has been done and sexual harassment is lower than the rest of the states. It is something that you see every day.

Here in Whatcom we get sun two months of the year. When the sun is out people dress with minimal clothing, especially the females or young ladies. My question, is that an invitation to harass her? Or sexually assault her? Not really. She has a right to dress however she is comfortable. It might not make us comfortable. It is not an invitation for us to attack her or attack him based on the way they are dressed.

We all have a right to our own concerns and opinions and mentality. That is our right as individuals. This doesn't give us permission to apply it on others. It is a matter of respecting the other's opinion. You can vocalize your opinion. That is your opinion.

Speaker: Doesn't this situation come under the category of excuses? "She was asking for it" is an excuse isn't it?

Blanca: It is. Being aware, not only of our boundaries and what makes us uncomfortable and being aware of our own biases with sexual harassment and assault is another step of prevention.

How do I feel about these topics? What do I feel is right when it comes to this? We need to address these.

Also knowing that sexual assault and harassment is never the victim's fault. This a choice that the abuser made. This is a choice. A person knows what they are doing.

So being aware fully boundaries or biases is a step towards prevention.

Joyce: Do you ever run across people who are the perpetrators or --

Blanca: Abusers.

Joyce: Who don't realize that they did anything wrong?

Blanca: In my experience I do come across that. A lot of abusers that come through our doors

that are oblivious to their behavior and their pattern is usually because they came from an abusive household themselves. It is still not an excuse but if you picture a child who grew up in a household with abuse, harassment, sexual assault is something that they see, and nobody tells the kid otherwise, they will believe this is the way that a relationship is.

It is normal for them. They might be completely unaware of what they do until someone steps in and says, "Actually this is not the way that people behave." Then they make a conscious effort to change.

Also, it is possible for abusers to change and to be good people. But just like they choose to be abusive they need to choose not to be. A lot of the time it is hard for them to accept that they are doing anything wrong. That is why we have perpetrator programs and support groups.

Since we are talking about services these are a few services that our agency offers. We have a 24/7 helpline. There is always someone to talk to about sexual assault, dating violence, everything. This can be for perpetrators, survivors or secondary survivors.

We have advocacy counseling sessions where you can meet with a person one on one. Another great thing we have at DVSAS is that we can meet you somewhere safe in the community. We can't go to your homes. We can meet at a park or church if you can't come to our offices. The services are mobile and flexible.

We can help with safety planning. A lot of the time the aggressors are someone the survivor knows and will encounter on a frequent basis. We can make a safety plan for if you find yourself in a place or a situation where the person is there and you need to get out.

We have legal advocacy or assistance. We are not lawyers. We cannot give legal advice, but we can refer to you to people who can. We have resources to provide to you all.

We have support groups for survivors or victims. We have quite a few groups. We have a sexual assault group run by Claudia Ackerman. We have parenting after violence. We have a domestic violence support group which meets both in our offices and the DSHS offices. They are open groups which means that anyone can go to the groups without preregistering.

We also have LBTGQ survivors' group. We have a Spanish group that happens in Everson. We have a few support groups. We have community education which I oversee.

I have brought with me quite a few pamphlets. These all have our services. All of this with more detail as to what they look like. As well as some small safety cards. These are a bit more discrete in case you or someone you know might not be safe carrying a big pamphlet. This can go in your pocket or in the palm of your hand.

We have these in various languages. We have them in Spanish and Russian. I brought English with me but if you need other languages let me know.

I will leave these here for anybody to take.

Speaker: Just wondering -- I think I know the answer -- say you observe another person and you like their clothing. I think it would be appropriate to say, "I like that color" or something like that. Nothing wrong, but it is unwanted -- well they didn't ask for me to comment but it is appropriate in a conversation. I have been timid around office -- well I didn't know what to say. I kept quiet. A neutral comment about color or style.

If I saw someone on the street and said, "Oh my god you look so hot and sexy." There is a big difference. Complementing someone is something good, a lot of us like it and some don't. It is a risk that we must take. If they say, "I don't appreciate that" then I can respond with "I apologize, that wasn't my intention but thank you for letting me know."

Acknowledge and accept her response and be OK with it.

Speaker: I give spontaneous compliments. No one has ever said "Please don't do that." Sometimes they are surprised but they say thank you.

Joyce: An abuser is like a bully. When I was a teaching we did a lot of training with children about bullying and how to avoid it. We talked about the bystander who can try to support the person being bullied. So as far as if you observe someone being harassed as a bystander do you have suggestions?

Blanca: For bystanders it is important to know when you step in. If you see something on the street or a party or a community event -- if you identify sexual assault or harassment you need to think about your safety. Is it safe to intervene? You need to keep yourself safe. If you feel that it is not safe for you to intervene, but you still have that feeling that you need to help it is OK to call 911 and report what you are seeing.

If there is an opportunity for which an abusive partner goes away, and the survivor is by themselves and you feel comfortable approaching them you can. You can tell what you observe and ask if they need help.

Some of us don't like putting ourselves out there. You can just tell them that there are organizations out there to help. You can tell them about DVSA. There are subtle ways.

The number one thing for being a bystander is your safety. After that you can decide on a course of action. Do you intervene? Do you call the police? Do you go to a friend?

There are different avenues.

Speaker: Women are great huggers. I find that with another woman if I am going to give her a hug I have never felt that this was hands off. I am listening to this as man to woman but are

you saying woman to woman?

Blanca: It can be a situation for anybody. Whether it is man to man, woman to woman, woman to child. This information can be applied to any scenario. It doesn't happen as often when it comes to woman to woman. It is our responsibility as the person initiating with this to make sure the person is OK. If you feel or sense any type of resistance -- which women have great intuition, -- you can say something.

Speaker: I see enough of this on television but becoming overly sensitive for crying out loud. You know. "Stay away from me" and everything. It is hard for me to understand. I have never been in a situation where anything like this has happened to me. I hear this situation as far as what you are saying -- well I just have a hard time with that.

Blanca: It is difficult. It is difficult to change things we are used to. I am not saying that you have to change anything about you. It is difficult to wrap our minds around change. And yes, we do see a lot of over sensitivity on television.

I think it is something that we haven't seen in the past. Since people are becoming aware of what their rights are and are verbally expressing them -- this is something we didn't see a lot in past years.

This is new. We can see this as oversensitivity or kids being spoiled. This is normal. It is OK for you to have those opinions. You have a right to your feelings. But it is more of being more open to whatever type of response people might give us.

You say you have never encountered someone who didn't want a hug --

Speaker: I am a widow. Sometimes a nice hug is something can really appreciate. This is the reason why I can understand with men to women -- but the other way around I have a hard time wrapping my mind around it. I don't know if anyone else feels this way.

Blanca: It is. You don't hear about women abusing other women as often as you hear a woman abusing a man or a man abusing a woman. The fact is that more men are abusers and the victims are females.

That is just what the research shows. But that doesn't mean that men are not victims themselves. It can happen the other way around. Everyone can fall victim to any of these things. In any type of relationship. Whether it is same sex or opposite sex. It is hard to picture a woman abusing a man. Right?

We hear "man of the house" or "be a man" or "suck it up." All those stereotypes are what prevent men from coming forward and seeking help. They are under the mentality that there is no way they can be abused.

It is the same thing with women to women. Are they really being mean or abusive? Are they just being a woman? All these stereotypes that men and women have can be barriers to identifying unwanted behavior and asking for help.

Speaker: My heart goes out to them. They are in an impossible situation. It is coming to the front now. Women in the working world. It is all about power and control. But if you are a single mother and working and you have a job and you want to do well in life and then the boss propositions you or does these behaviors. If you don't comply you will be out of the job. It is that simple. It is happening at every level of society. This is from movie stars to people in office.

I hope that these women who are speaking out will draw attention to the fact that -- well I don't know what working women can do in their situation! If they resist or tell anyone they can be fired!

Blanca: This is a very common behavior in the workplace especially when it comes to women. The best response I can come up with for that. Is to know your rights. A lot of jobs or organizations are forced to train employees on what sexual harassment looks like. The employees are provided with resources. There are the people that you can go to.

Mike Sweeney: Thank you Blanca! Very informative. You are a very good speaker. You had a lot of good things to say. We hope that this wasn't too uncomfortable. This was something we needed to do. I can see us doing it in the future. This is an issue in our society today.

[End of meeting ]