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Sexual assault support group announces \$1M prevention, education bill

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By Dana Sung and Mia Cathell

Sexual violence prevention non-profit coalition Jane Doe Inc. announced a new bill for a \$1 million budget from the State for sexual and domestic assault prevention and education for the 2019-20 state congressional session.

Jane Doe Inc. hosted a briefing at the Massachusetts State House Wednesday to detail the bill and other measures they are pushing for.

Five speakers from different Jane Doe member organizations detailed the coalition's plan to spend current state funding, request further funding and address gaps in services and prevention through several new bills proposed to the legislature regarding sexual assault and violence prevention programs. The speakers shared several stories of survivors' resilience and recovery.

Maureen Gallagher, the policy director for Jane Doe Inc., said in an interview before the briefing that attendees could expect to hear about the proposed bills that Jane Doe will support this session.

"In Wednesday's briefing, we are particularly excited to introduce the new bill that now has a million dollar budget from the state government," Gallagher said. "It is going to the prevention and education of sexual and domestic assault."

As for Jane Doe Inc.'s budget priorities, Gallagher said during the briefing the coalition would use state funding for sexual assault and domestic violence prevention programs to serve college students, LGBTQ groups and other Boston residents, while also providing economic and recovery support for survivors.

Jane Doe Inc.'s website summarizes its 2019 bill proposals, which include "An Act Relative to Sexual Violence on Higher Education Campuses" that focuses on introducing policy to strengthen prevention services on college campuses and the "Safe Communities Act," which seeks to "restore community trust in police" by separating law enforcement from immigration.

Sabrina Santiago, co-executive director of The Network/La Red and another speaker at the briefing, wrote in an email before the briefing that the proposed bills and funding would also be crucial in "creating an environment" in which immigrant survivors of sexual assault would be able to turn to the police when threatened.

"Right now there is so much fear about the connection between the police and ICE that immigrant survivors who are documented or undocumented are afraid to go to the police," Santiago wrote. "The safe communities act would create a clear separation between police and ICE."

Gallagher said prevention is a critical component to confronting the issues the organization works to address.

"We need sex education that provides information in consent and healthy relationships — a key part to discuss when we talk about prevention," Gallagher said. "And LGBT students need to feel represented. Our work on campuses are important when we talk about prevention, we need to provide spaces for them and talk about sexual health."

As of January, Jane Doe Inc. will receive more than \$42 million in funding from the state government in 2019 to fund various sexual and domestic violence support programs, according to the organization's website. The coalition plans to request around another \$1.5 million dollars from the state in 2020.



From left to right: Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, Amrith Fernandes Prabhu, Paulo Pinto and Sabrina Santiago. The four panelists spoke at a hearing on sexual and domestic assault legislation at the Massachusetts State House Wednesday. CHLOE GRINBERG/ DAILY FREE PRESS STAFF

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Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, a panel speaker representing Independence House, a Cape Cod domestic and sexual abuse support organization, delved into how these bills impact not only the funding made available to Jane Doe Inc., but also individual survivors of domestic assault.

“I try to think about the survivors that we serve and their complexity and diversity,” Putnam said. “I think it is important that we remember that, but the impact mainly has to do with its profound of physical safety, emotional safety, mental health and well-being. “

Putnam said that she hoped the legislature would come to realize the immense positive impact state funding for sexual and domestic violence prevention programs had on survivors and residents.

“I want to have some survivors’ voices into the room, and I thought it is important to start with that, especially for the legislators in this room, to really see how this funding, small amount of funding, goes a long way,” Putnam said. “And the effects last well beyond the time that we even see survivors.”

Sara Stanley, the executive director at Healing Abuse Working for Change, attended the briefing and said she thought it emphasized the important work that Jane Doe Inc. is doing as a coalition.

“We are very grateful to Jane Doe as a member agency of a statewide coalition,” Stanley said. “This was a really important platform because we communicated collectively to our legislators of the importance of not only our budget items, but things that we needed specifically to support the domestic violence programs, sexual assault programs and the violence assault prevention and prevention education program items.”

Massachusetts legislators also attended the event, including Rep. Denise Provost of Somerville. Provost said she was happy she attended and that she recognized the real impact of sexual assault and domestic violence on Boston residents.

“Sexual assault and domestic violence continue to be stubbornly intractable issues everywhere,” Provost said. “I am glad that the discussion took place, and I have long wondered what is the reason for the persistence of domestic violence and sexual assault and what actually can be effective in reducing both.”

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