

# *Students weigh in on campus sex assault bills at Quinsigamond Community College forum*

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WORCESTER – The statistics tell one story, which is that Quinsigamond Community College has one of the lowest rates of sexual violence among colleges in the region.

But students at the school tell their own story, which is that Quinsigamond, despite not being a residential college, is still a place where students, male and female, can be sexually harassed or even assaulted.

Which is why state Sen. Harriette Chandler and state Rep. James O'Day were eager to hear students' input on two bills seeking to address campus sexual offenses. The lawmakers were at a town hall-style forum at the college on Monday, the first of what could be a series of such listening sessions across the state this year.

“If we don't know what's happening at (Quinsigamond), then shame on us,” said Mrs. Chandler, D-Worcester, a co-sponsor of one of the bills, called An Act Relative to Sexual Violence on Higher Education Campuses.

The bill, which has been awaiting passage in the Legislature for three years, would institute a range of changes aimed at establishing stronger protections for survivors of sexual assault, expanding education for students around sexual violence prevention, and providing options for students who may want to report an offense.

The other bill, An Act Requiring Sexual Misconduct Climate Surveys at Institutions of Higher Education, would do what its name implies, and require campuses to gather student input on issues related to sexual offenses every two years.

Colleges are already mandated by the federal government to track and report sexual assaults and other crimes annually under the Clery Act. Quinsigamond's latest report would seem to indicate the problem is virtually nonexistent on campus. It reported zero instances of rape at the college from 2015 to 2017.

But Stephanie Teixeira, Quinsigamond's Student Senate president and a student adviser on the state Board of Higher Education, said she was raped when she was a student around two years ago, and believes there are likely other survivors who simply haven't come forward for a variety of reasons.

#### Worcester parade and road race

Ms. Teixeira, who organized Monday's town hall, wants to ensure community college students don't become forgotten amid the many other survivors at the state's four-year colleges and universities, which are more the focal point of the campus sexual assault issue.

"We're not the ones automatically thought of," she said, but it's often the community college students who are juggling even more responsibilities in their lives than traditional four-year college students, including their own families in some cases. "It's happening to us, and we have to go home and deal with that struggle and still take care of our children."

While Ms. Teixeira felt Quinsigamond at least is relatively proactive on the issue – "we're not perfect," she said, but the college was willing to host Monday's discussion, for example – some other students believe the campus isn't doing enough for survivors. Dean Fisher, a student at the school, said he felt the college representatives he dealt with when reporting an issue were defensive and unhelpful.

When Mrs. Chandler asked whether students at the meeting felt there was a problem on campus, Mr. Fisher said, "I believe so ... (sexual offenses) are underreported because people are afraid to report it."

Elizabeth Woods, the college's Title IX coordinator, described a more even-handed and thoughtful approach to dealing with sexual offense complaints at the school. She said Quinsigamond is one of the few colleges that trains peer advocates to serve as a resource for survivors, for example.

Mr. O'Day, D-West Boylston, said a more comprehensive approach to solving the campus rape issue may need to involve education at the grade-school level – something his bill, An Act Relative to Healthy Youth, would help accomplish by establishing new guidelines for sex education in the state.

"It's a huge issue," he said, noting that the Worcester school system currently offers little in the way of sexual health curriculum at the high school level, for example. "We're not talking about the necessity of doing the right thing, of teaching the right things ... we can have the survey, but if (the student) doesn't know how to deal with these issues, what good is a survey?"

Little of Monday's discussion was spent on the actual details of the sex assault bills, although a few students offered a few general ideas for addressing the issue on a community college campus, such as installing better lighting and similar safety infrastructure for night students and putting up motivational murals.

Mrs. Chandler and Mr. O'Day also offered another way students can weigh in on the legislation: by attending the public hearing for the bills at the Statehouse on April 9.

“If you can find time to go, and bring your voice for Quinsigamond Community College ... that’s how things get changed,” Mr. O'Day said.