

Black women raise money and awareness for rape kits

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(Photo: Mandi Wright)

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A broad coalition of women's groups is coming together to raise awareness about sexual assault and to propel black women to be a force for getting Detroit's languishing rape kits processed.

The coalition is named the African American 490 Challenge because it is urging black women, individually and collectively, to raise multiples of \$490, the cost of processing a single rape kit. The group will kick off its efforts at a gathering Tuesday morning to be attended by leaders of several black women's service organizations, sororities and other supporters.

Their effort buttresses the work of Enough SAID (Enough Sexual Assault In Detroit), the rape kit testing and investigation effort being led by Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy and the Michigan Women's Foundation. Worthy has been leading a campaign to get kits tested since learning five years ago that more than 11,300 kits — the key investigative evidence of assault taken from women during a physical exam — were left unopened and untested in a police storage unit.

Michigan gets \$7.5M to help clear untested rape kits

State, local, private and public funds have resulted from Worthy's efforts, and donations have poured in from all over the country. The African American 490 Challenge is working with Enough SAID and plans to raise at least \$650,000.

"I think this is a fabulous effort," said Worthy, who will attend Tuesday's meeting. "If ever there's an issue these women should get behind, it's this one. The support they'll be able to amass will be essential to our success."

About 10,000 kits have been tested since an assistant prosecutor discovered them in a police storage unit in 2009. More than 1,000 kits have yet to be tested, and money is needed to complete the investigations of those assaults, Worthy said.

Investigations of the kits thus far have revealed that more than 500 rapists were serial offenders, according to data from the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office.



Kim Trent, Board of Governors, Wayne State University (Photo: Jarrad Henderson)

More than 80% of victims associated with the rape kits are African-American women, according to data released by the foundation.

"They look like my mother, my aunts, our sisters, our daughters, our nieces," said Maureen Stapleton, a local leader of the Links and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, two community service organizations tailored to African-American women.

Stapleton joined forces with civic leader Kim Trent and public relations executive Darci McConnell in spearheading the coalition. Trent was moved to action by a Facebook debate that seemed to place the blame for sexual assault on women.

"I decided I needed to do something constructive with my anger," said Trent, a member of the Wayne State University Board of Governors. "We want to come together to say: 'This is unacceptable, and we are black women who stand ready to make sure this never happens again, and that the women it happened to get justice.'"

Both Trent and McConnell said they were victims of sexual assault, and neither reported it.

Trent said statistics show that the majority of women don't report sexual assault. "Those who do deserve to have their day in court," especially given the invasive procedure required to obtain rape kits.

"We want to make sure that people understand how serious this is, and that they don't do what many of us did, which was to keep quiet and retreat," McConnell said.

The coalition has begun raising money through an online donation site — crowdrise.com/AfricanAmerican490Challenge — and has gained the support of local businesses owned by black women, including two spas — Woodhouse Day spa in Detroit and Lavender Mobile Spa — that are donating part of profits to the effort.

Additionally, the group is encouraging black women's groups, book clubs and other organizations to host fund-raising house parties and other events to raise money.

"The great majority of the victims of these unsolved crimes are black women," states

The kickoff meeting will be at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Detroit Association of Women's Clubs, 5461 Brush St. in Detroit.

UPCOMING SPA EVENTS

The two spas are holding fundraising efforts this month for the African American 490 Challenge are:

- The Woodhouse Day Spa, 1447 Woodward Ave., which will donate 10% of its profits on Oct. 22 to the challenge. In addition, there will be a reception for supporters 5-7:30 p.m. that day. The reception is free and open to the public.
- Lavender Mobile Spa will host a fund-raiser at the Westin Hotel in Southfield 1500 Town Center, Southfield, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Oct. 24.