

From Queen's Park by Sylvia Jones MPP ? Bill 120 would require sexual assault law training for judicial officers

Before the legislature returns in the fall, I wanted to highlight a private members bill that proposes to make a real difference for Ontarians.

MPP Laurie Scott, PC Critic for Women's Issues, introduced Bill 120 Mandatory Sexual Assault Law Training for Judicial Officers Act, 2017 April 5. If passed, Bill 120 would require sexual assault training for current and new provincial judicial appointees.

As a member of the 2015 Select Committee on Sexual Violence and Harassment with MPP Scott, I heard from survivors, family members, advocates, health care practitioners, justice and social support workers about their experience in dealing with sexual violence and harassment in Ontario. These responses reinforced to me that the current education for provincial judicial appointees on sexual assault needs to be upgraded to include current and new judges.

The Select Committee suggested 67 recommendations to address the issue of sexual violence and harassment in Ontario. One of the recommendations included providing training to judges to address systemic problems in our province. If passed, this bill will give women more confidence in our judicial system by ensuring all provincial judges are effectively training in handling the sensitivity of sexual assault cases.

Many individuals outside the PC party agreed with MPP Scott's bill. Unfortunately the Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services and the Attorney General were not as quick to support the legislation, saying it could potentially threaten judicial independence. Measures like MPP Scott's will not threaten judicial independence, but will instead give sexual assault survivors more faith in the judicial system.

Instances of concerning comments by judicial officials across Canada have caused outrage. For example, the Calgary judge asking a sexual assault survivor why she didn't keep her "knees together." The Canadian Judicial Council's report called the judge's comments "so manifestly and profoundly destructive of the concept of impartiality, integrity and independence of the judicial role that the judge was rendered incapable of executing the judicial office."

With instances like that, it is time for Ontario to do everything it can to restore sexual assault survivor's faith in the system.

While the government did recently announce changes to the "educational plan," for only new judicial appointees, these changes do not apply to current judicial appointees. The government's plan means that judges are only "encouraged" to attend criminal law seminars, which include an "option" of sexual assault training. Instead, Bill 120 would compel both new and current judicial officers to have a comprehensive education on sexual assault law.

If you agree that Bill 120 needs to be passed, I encourage you to visit www.sylviajonesmpp.ca and sign the petition in support of Bill 120. -30-