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Press Release

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SAFEPLACE OPENS PERMANENT NEW HOME FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS TO RECEIVE EXAMS: ELOISE HOUSE

(August 13, 2015 – AUSTIN, TX): SafePlace, an Austin nonprofit organization, today opened Eloise House, the region's first and only 24/7 facility dedicated solely for sexual assault survivors to receive forensic exams, advocacy and support. The opening of this facility marks a major milestone in the community's effort to serve survivors and address the epidemic of sexual assault.

Each year in Travis County an average of 900 sexual assaults are reported, with roughly half of those victims seeking Sexual Assault Forensic Exams (SAFEs).

Historically, those survivors would be referred to St. David's Medical Center, the community's designated resource, where a group of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs) was contracted to conduct the highly-specialized exams. In September 2013, a new Texas law required that **all** hospital emergency rooms offer victims the option of having a medical forensic exams on-site or to transfer to a community-designated facility.

"Our system in Austin-Travis County was struggling to keep up with the continued increase in sexual assault cases in our area," said Emily LeBlanc, Director of Community Advocacy for SafePlace. "Members of SARRT – the Austin-Travis County Sexual Assault Response and Resource Team -- became so concerned with the gaps in service—especially long wait times for exams—that ultimately we determined an alternative resource was required to augment our system's capacity."

"It is very disturbing when you have an individual who has been victimized and then subsequently they are re-victimized by our own efforts to try and help them," said Lt. Gena Curtis, who oversees the sex crimes unit of the Austin Police Department.

(more)



PAGE TWO.

When the need for a facility arose on short notice, SafePlace quickly converted a shelter room on its campus into temporary facilities for SANEs to conduct these exams and, on June 1, SafePlace became the primary place in Central Texas for adult and adolescent survivors to receive a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam.

SafePlace has since hired 17 full-time nurses that are on-call 24/7. In the first 60 days, their SANEs and Survivor Advocates served 116 survivors.

"Nurses and advocates are the heart of this operation," LeBlanc said. "Their remarkable compassion coupled with extensive training make them vital resources for survivors and the system. And they take their responsibility very seriously."

As soon as they became the primary location in Central Texas for sexual assault exams, SafePlace officials began working to establish a more permanent facility to house its Sexual Assault Nursing and Advocacy Program.

Preliminary funding was provided by the John Paul DeJoria *JP's Peace Love and Happiness Foundation*, and was named for his wife, Eloise. After construction got underway, many individuals and companies contributed to the effort, including St. David's Medical Center which donated all of the initial medical supplies for the exam rooms.

The facility, which is on the SafePlace campus, has two exam rooms, a comfortable waiting and reception area, and a private bathroom. Sexual Assault Forensic Exams are conducted free-of-charge at Eloise House.

For more information about Eloise House, please visit <http://www.safeplace.org/EloiseHouse>. If you need help, please call the SafePlace 24/7 Hotline at 512.267.SAFE (7233).

SafePlace

SafePlace is an Austin-based nonprofit organization providing safety for individuals and families affected by sexual assault and domestic violence. In addition, the organization promotes safe and healthy relationships, increasing the capacity for prevention in Central Texas. SafePlace works with community partners to create change in attitudes, behaviors and policies that perpetuate the acceptance of, and impact our understanding and responses to, sexual and domestic violence. SafePlace is a Founding Partner of the LIFT Alliance.

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