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## Sex assault victims applaud new law

### Legislation removes time limit on prosecuting crime

By Dirk Perrefort  
STAFF WRITER

WATERBURY — For more than a decade Donna Palomba of Woodbury had no idea who put a gun to her head and brutally raped her while her two small children were sleeping in the room next door.

"In the early morning hours of that Saturday, a masked intruder broke into my home," Palomba said. "Helpless and acutely aware that my children were in the next room, I told myself not to scream. As the attack continued, the assailant used a knife to cut my clothing, sexually assaulted me, and threatened to kill me if I called the police."

Although the rapist was identified through the use of DNA evidence more than 11 years after the 1993 assault, the statute of limitations on sexual assault crimes had expired, so her attacker could not be prosecuted.

Palomba gathered her strength and fought for the elimination of time limits on such prosecutions. This week her struggle for victims throughout the state was rewarded. She stood beside Gov. M. Jodi Rell on Tuesday at the Waterbury Police Department as the state's top official signed legislation that eliminates the

statute of limitations on sexual assault crimes when DNA evidence is involved.

"This signing means a great deal to sexual assault victims in the future," Palomba said. "No longer will they have to deal with what I had to."

John Regan, 50, of Waterbury, was convicted last fall of first-degree kidnapping for the incident — the statute of limitations for that charge had not yet run out — and is serving a 15-year prison sentence.

The conviction, however, came after Regan attempted to grab a 17-year-old female cross-country track star in a Saratoga Springs, N.Y., high school parking lot Halloween night in 2005. The girl managed to break free, authorities were called, and police found a tarp, a shovel and a noose in Regan's van.

"Make no mistake — sexual assault is a violent crime, it is not a crime of passion," Rell said Tuesday. "It is a violence of the most personal and devastating kind, as brutal in its own right as murder. And it deserves not only harsh punishment but our very best and unswerving effort to bring the perpetrators to justice."

Brookfield attorney Helen McGonigle, who also serves as chairwoman of the Connecticut Bar Association's Crime Victim

### About the law

The new law eliminates the statute of limitations on sexual assault cases when:

- The identity of the assailant was established through a DNA comparison using evidence collected at the time of the offense.
- The victim reported the crime to police within five years of the actual offense.

Rights Committee, said removing the time limit is a step in the right direction.

"Because the DNA technology is becoming much more advanced, this will greatly enhance the chances of catching a suspect and bringing them to prosecution for their crimes," she said. "Strengthening the sexual assault laws in Connecticut will also serve as a deterrent. Hopefully, some of the perpetrators will think twice before committing a crime in this state."

Heidi Rankin, a community educator with the Women's Center of Greater Danbury Sexual Assault Crisis Services, said the new law will be vitally important to the victims of sexual assault perpetrated by strangers. She added, however, that the majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone known to the victim.



Carol Kaliff/Staff photographer  
Donna Palomba of Woodbury, left, chatting with her daughter, Sarah, 21, advocated for a change in state law removing the statute of limitations on sexual assault.

"The statute of limitations had been five years, and for that to now be unlimited is very important," she said. "This will help bring more perpetrators of sexual assaults to justice."

Laura Cordes, an official with the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, said a phone survey conducted in 2000 showed that only 16 percent of sexual assault victims report the crime to authorities. About 40 percent of clients served by crisis service centers throughout the state last year reported the assault to police, she said.

"Many sexual assault survivors fear for their safety and privacy, and face undue shame, blame and guilt," she said. "So for those who are able to come forward and report the crime to the police who do not know the offender, this new law permanently opens a door that was in many cases shut too soon."

Palomba, who formed a non-profit organization earlier this year called Jane Doe No More, said her next mission is to make the new law retroactive to older, unsolved sexual assault cases in the state.

"It will be an uphill battle, but I don't see any reason why DNA evidence can't be used retroactively in these cases," she said.

Her daughter, Sarah Palomba, said her mother's ability to rise above the horrific attack is a testament to her strength and courage.

"For my mother to take something so tragic and turn it into something so positive is an inspiration for all victims of sexual assault," she said. "I'm very proud of what she's been able to accomplish. It shows that nothing is impossible."