

Officers try to stop false rape reports

By **TIM HANSON**
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A 27-year-old Spokane woman was charged with obstructing a public servant last year after she admitted to filing a phony rape report.

Officers also have charged a 15-year-old girl with the same offense and a warrant has been issued for another woman who allegedly lied to police about being raped.

Detectives say false rape reports take up valuable time and place an unnecessary burden on investigators. To discourage other women from filing false rape reports, police say they plan to continue filing obstructing charges as often as the need arises.

At the Rape Crisis Network, however, a spokeswoman said she doesn't want to see the obstructing charges discourage women from reporting rapes.

"I just hope that the message gets across that rape is underreported and that we want to see women continue to report rapes," said Susan Fabrikant, Rape Crisis Network program supervisor.

Detective Lt. Leland Elliott, head of the unit that investigates rapes, said about half the reported cases of rape or attempted rape end up being "unfounded," or the victim decides not to press charges.

It is impossible for detectives to calculate how many rape reports are false, Elliott said. Just because a victim doesn't press charges, it doesn't mean her report was false.

If detectives find discrepancies in statements made by complainants, however, the women are asked to take polygraph examinations, he said.

"At this point, many victims decide they don't want anything more done on their case," said Elliott. "Some legitimate rape victims will back out because they don't want to go through the court system. Some women feel they don't want anybody to know about it (the rape), a sort of fear of the stigma of being a rape victim.

"Other times the suspect is a friend or a relative. There are a lot of reasons . . . but without the victim's complete cooperation, we don't have a case."

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Although "unfounded cases are not typical," Elliott said, half of his unit's time spent investigating rape cases "goes for nothing."

Police said the 27-year-old woman who was charged with obstructing a public servant last year had telephoned them and said she had been raped.

When officers arrived at her Browne's Addition apartment, the woman told them she awoke about 2:30 a.m. and, for some reason, opened a sliding glass door that led to a small balcony. A man was hiding on the balcony, she said, and forced his way into her second-story apartment.

The man, whom she said was armed with a knife, then raped her, police were told.

After a month-long investigation, however, the woman admitted she had fabricated the story. She was charged with obstructing a public servant, but the case against her eventually was dismissed after she agreed to be counseled at the Spokane Mental Health Center.

The 15-year-old girl who lied to detectives originally told them she had been assaulted by a man driving a pickup truck. The girl said she was walking home from a store when the man approached her near Morton and Wabash, struck her in the face and unsuccessfully tried to force her into the truck.

After police investigated the report, the girl admitted to detectives that the attempted rape story was not true. Investigators discovered that she had been beaten by her boyfriend but she did not want to press charges.

Shortly thereafter, detectives filed obstructing charges against the girl and the matter was referred to Juvenile Court.

The third person police have charged with obstructing, a 26-year-old Spokane woman, told detectives she was raped

by a man who came to her door posing as a vacuum cleaner salesman.

Once inside the house, the salesman held a knife to her throat, forced her to undress and then raped her, the woman told detectives.

That story, too, turned out to be a lie, and detectives filed charges. When the woman failed to appear in District Court, a warrant was issued for her arrest. Police still are looking for her.

"Charging these women for filing false reports is something new," Elliott said. "But this is the only way we know how to discourage women from filing false reports. We've had other false reports filed, but for various reasons we didn't charge them."

Although police are taking a tougher stand against women who file false rape reports, Elliott said he doesn't want women to be afraid to report rapes.

"We encourage people to report rapes as soon as possible or any other information about rapes so we can investigate," the detective said.

That sentiment is shared by Fabrikant of the Rape Crisis Network and Spokane Prosecuting Attorney Donald Brockett.

"If you do a story, I think it has to be handled really delicately in terms of not discouraging people from reporting," Fabrikant told a Spokesman-Review reporter. "I think that these are three abstract cases from I-don't-know-how-many they had reported to them."

Brockett compared police investigations of false rape reports to the Fire Department "responding to a fire alarm where there is no fire."

"I don't want to see anything done to prohibit people from reporting crime . . ." said Brockett. "We need to have the real figures to finally know what crime there is in society. On the other

hand, as a prosecutor I obviously have to go along with the fact that they ought to report crimes that actually occur.

"It's very expensive for society's agents (prosecutors and police) to investigate cases that end up being determined to be falsely reported."

While police said 132 rapes and rape attempts were reported last year, Fabrikant said Rape Crisis Network received nearly 500 such reports during the same period of time.

The program director said one reason network statistics are higher is because they include on their list reports of children younger than 16 who are sexual assault victims.

Elliott said police keep statistics of sexual contact other than rape and rape attempts separate.

"We go on the assumption that people are telling us the truth," Fabrikant said. "We do treatment, so whether they're telling the truth or not really is not a crucial issue for us in terms of what we do with them."

"I think it is real significant if someone is lying. To lie about a rape is serious. There must be something real pressing going on in their life if they need to lie about it," she said.

Asked how she feels about women being charged with obstructing, Fabrikant said she doesn't like to see it, but realizes that it is the detectives' "legal right."

"I can understand their position," she said. "If they spend two weeks on a case and are totally bombing out because she's not being totally honest, that's within their legal right."

Fabrikant also stressed the importance of reporting rapes.

"That's the only way to bring about justice for the assailant," she said. "That's the only way to bring about justice for the victim."