Opinion: Bringing awareness to sexual violence

By Chuck Allen

In Nevada, every 8 hours, 6 minutes someone is raped.

Throughout the month of April, the Washoe County Sheriff's Office will be supporting the Alliance for Victim's Rights and Sexual Assault Awareness in Northern Nevada. Sexual violence is a serious problem that can have lasting and harmful effects on victims and their family. It's important to raise awareness and have an open discussion about prevention strategies.

Sexual assaults can happen to anyone: children, students, wives, mothers, grandmothers, the rich and poor, boys and men. The assailants can be anyone: classmates, co-workers, or a total stranger although often a friend or a family member.

The most predominant form of sexual assault in Washoe County is alcohol or drug related.

"In many alcohol related sexual assaults, the perpetrator takes advantage of the victims intoxication," said Detective Lt. Tom Green, "when the victim is drinking, it makes it very difficult for them to guard against an assault."

The sheriff's office offers the following recommendations on ways to reduce risk of a sexual assault:

1. Avoid Dangerous Situations

Don't let alcohol or other drugs cloud your judgment. Most law enforcement calls on sexual assaults occur at parties involving drugs and alcohol.

Trust your instincts-if a situation or place makes you feel uncomfortable or uneasy, leave.

Be aware of your surroundings. Knowing where you are and who is around you may help you to find a way to get out of a bad situation.

Try to avoid isolated areas or being alone. It is more difficult to get help if no one is around.

Walk with purpose. Even if you don’t know where you are going, act like you do.

2. Safety Planning

Make sure your cell phone is with you and charged and that you have money.

Don’t leave your drink unattended. If you leave your drink alone, get a new one. Don’t accept drinks from people you don’t know or trust.

Have a code word with friends or family so that if you don’t feel comfortable, you can call them and communicate your discomfort without the person you are with knowing. Your friends or family can then come to get you or make up an excuse for you to leave. If you see a friend heading into a dangerous situation at a party, encourage them to leave or stay by their side.Be conscious of exits or other escape routes.

Think about options for transportation (cab, car, bus, train, etc.)

Avoid putting music headphones in both ears so that you can be more aware of your surroundings, especially if you are walking alone.

3. Your Home

Make sure all doors (don’t forget sliding glass doors) and windows have sturdy, well-installed locks, and use them. Install a wide-angle peephole in the door. Keep entrances

well-lighted.

Never open your door to strangers. Offer to make an emergency call while someone waits outside. Check the identification of sales or service people before letting them in. Don’t be embarrassed to phone for verification.

Be wary of isolated spots-apartment laundry rooms, underground garages, parking lots, offices after business hours. Walk with a friend, co-worker, or security guard, particularly at night.

Know your neighbors, so you have someone to call or go to if you’re uncomfortable or frightened.

If you come home and see a door or window open, or broken, don’t go in. Call the police from a cell phone, public phone or a neighbor’s phone.

4. Outdoors

Avoid walking or jogging alone, especially at night. Stay in well-traveled, well-lit areas.

Wear clothes and shoes that give you freedom of movement.

Be careful if anyone in a car asks you for directions; if you answer, keep your distance from the car.

Have your key ready before you reach the door-home, car, or office.

If you think you’re being followed, change direction and head for open stores, restaurants, theaters, or a house with its lights on.
5. Your Car

Look around and under your car and in the back seat before you get in.
If your car breaks down, lift the hood, lock the doors, and turn on your flashers. Call police on a cell phone, or use a

“Call Police” banner or flares.
If someone stops, roll the window down slightly and ask the person to call the police or a tow service.

Don’t hitchhike, ever. And don’t ever pick up a hitchhiker.

6. If the Unthinkable Happens – Your Goal is to Survive

Scream and make a scene. Be rude, make noise to discourage your attacker from following.

Alert those around you if you are threatened.

If you become a victim of a crime, you should call the police. The sooner you tell, the greater the chances the rapist will be caught. But if you are uncomfortable about calling the police, contact the Crisis Call Center’s Sexual Assault Support Services 800.273.8255.

Residents are encouraged to attend any of the following special events in support of Sexual Assault Awareness Month:

UNR Joe Crowley Student Union, April 21 – 6:45pm: Screening of “The Mask You Live In” with a community/panel discussion following the film. The Mask You Live In follows boys and young men as they struggle to stay true to them-selves while negotiating America’s narrow definition of masculinity.

Alliance for Victims’ Rights (AVR) Washoe County Candlelight Vigil & Award Ceremony on April 22 at 5:30pm at 1 South Sierra St. in Reno.

Safe & Healthy Homes Fair & 5k River Run/Walk hosted by Washoe County Domestic Violence Task Force on April 18 from 8-11:30am, Idlewild Park California Building.

Chuck Allen is sheriff of Washoe County.