

Activists relieved to get Campus Assault Bill to Governor Baker

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

College students would be anonymously surveyed about their experiences with sexual misconduct on campus and would have access to new, confidential resources in the event of sexual assault, under a bill that's now on Gov. Charlie Baker's desk after a last-minute flurry of activity in the Legislature this week.

In a state rich with college campuses, versions of the bill have been filed since 2015, driven by student advocates and recent graduates who have been sharing their stories with lawmakers.

Supporters gathered on a Zoom call Tuesday night and into Wednesday morning as they watched the bill bounce back and forth between the House and the Senate in the final hours of the 2019-2020 legislative session, while the two branches exchanged amendments tweaking its wording.

"This literally started with eight of us sitting in a basement, and it's hard to believe that we've come this far, to the point where it's the words that we wrote and the ideas that we spoke will change the law in our state for generations to come," said Every Voice Coalition founder and co-chair John Gabrieli.

Gabrieli said the coalition formed to create more transparency around the presence of sexual violence on college campuses and to bring student and survivor voices to table in policy discussions.

Passage of the bill is “incredibly validating” for the students and advocates who have made phone calls, rallied their communities and written to lawmakers, and those people will now be watching to see how Baker acts, Gabrieli said.

The House and Senate’s final votes sending Baker the bill (S 2979) after 12:30 a.m. on Wednesday, and a 10-day review period would mean that he has until Saturday, Jan. 16 to act on it.

Jane Doe Inc., a coalition focused on addressing sexual and domestic violence, urged Baker to “swiftly sign the bill into law.”

“We know how difficult it can be for survivors of sexual assault to come forward and speak to anyone about what they experienced, and that when they do, they are often met with disbelief and limited resources for support,” JDI policy director Hema Sarang-Sieminski said in a statement. “This new law would address both of these concerns as well as put an emphasis on prevention.”

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu signed a similar bill backed by the Every Voice Coalition into law last July.

According to Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, who with Rep. Lori Ehrlich sponsored the original House versions of the Massachusetts bill, the legislation would require each campus to appoint a confidential resource advisor to help students access support after a sexual misconduct incident, and institutions that do not have their own sexual assault crisis centers would need to enter into an agreement with a local center to provide services to students.

“Rape culture is alive and well on our campuses. Twenty percent, or one in five, young women are sexually assaulted at college, the great majority between Labor Day and Thanksgiving of their freshman or sophomore year,” sad Farley-Bouvier, a Pittsfield Democrat. “This bill, led by young people

themselves, will go a long way in changing the culture, preventing sexual assault, and bringing justice for those impacted.”

A task force would be created to develop questions for a sexual misconduct climate survey, which after review by state higher education officials, would be distributed to colleges and universities. Schools could also write their own surveys, and both public and independent higher education institutions would need to survey their students at least once every four years, and post a summary of the anonymous responses online.

Farley-Bouvier and Ehrlich did not discuss the bill on the floor when the House acted on it Tuesday. Ehrlich said on her website that the two decided not to make speeches “so the bill didn’t run out of time” in the final hours of the session, calling it the right decision as the bill “barely made it over the line in time.”

Ehrlich, a Marblehead Democrat, posted the speech she would have given online. “From a consumer standpoint, climate surveys provide a means of transparency for parents and prospective students to make informed decisions about their safety during what is typically a student’s first time living independently,” she wrote.

Additionally, the bill requires colleges and universities to adopt sexual misconduct policies and post them online. The policies would need to include procedures for reporting misconduct, information on receiving emergency assistance, the rights of students and employees, and a summary of procedures for resolving complaints.

Sen. Michael Moore, a Millbury Democrat who filed an initial Senate version of the bill, said it would ensure that students are trained on sexual violence prevention and bystander strategies, and that they are made aware of the rights of the reporting party and the accused during the disciplinary

process, as well as any sanctions that may be imposed by the school.