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Safety forum to address sex-crime fears

By Jill Fahy
 Free Press Staff Writer

Questions remain about Laura Winterbottom's death even though her suspected killer is in custody and the initial fear of many Burlington residents has lessened.

Some people express astonishment that Gerald Montgomery, the convicted sex offender charged in the slaying, was not listed on the state's Internet sex offender registry and want to know why. Others want to know what they can do to protect themselves and their families from sexual predators and other criminals.

"This was the highest profile event that anyone can remember," said Burlington Police Lt. Michael Schirling of the March 8 killing. "It puts people on edge, it brings back memories for victims. ... It's not good."

City police and advocates from the Women's Rape Crisis Center in Burlington will hold a public forum Wednesday on sexual violence awareness and general safety issues. The forum at the McClure Multigenerational Center on North Winooski Avenue also will include an explanation of Vermont's sex offender registry -- a hot topic among many who question its effectiveness in light of the Winterbottom homicide.

The event, organizers say, will provide ample time for residents to air concerns.

"This is a way for people who are worried or angry to say what they need to say or ask questions," said Celia Cuddy, executive director of the Women's Rape Crisis Center.

Sexual violence awareness month doesn't start until April, but the topic couldn't be any more relevant now, Cuddy said, less than three weeks after Winterbottom was found raped, beaten and strangled behind a house in the Old North End. Montgomery, 33, was arrested last week and charged with first-degree murder and aggravated sexual assault.

Personal safety tips will be offered at the forum. Trusting one's instincts, traveling in groups and taking a self-defense course are all suggestions. The event is also meant to inform residents about Vermont laws and how people can help change laws and policies relating to sexual violence.

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"Many community members are very surprised that a registered sex offender could be living and working right in their neighborhood and they wouldn't be notified of that," Cuddy said.

Montgomery is among the 2,205 people on the sex-offender registry available to police, but his level of sex offense -- a conviction for lewd and lascivious conduct and a failure to comply with the registry -- did not qualify him for the online list of offenders accessible to the public. Members of the public can inquire whether someone is on the list available to police, but only by name.

Winterbottom's slaying has roused fear and disbelief among people in the community, particularly women. Cuddy said the Women's Rape Crisis Center has received many calls -- some from women who have been sexually assaulted in the past.

"We're talking to a whole lot of women who have survived sexual violence, and this is really triggering their feelings," Cuddy said. "Their own victimizations are roaring back up, and they're in a whole lot of pain right now."

Her Burlington organization served 431 people last year -- most of them women, Cuddy said.

Much of the community buzz since the slaying has centered on its seemingly random nature. The notion that Winterbottom just may have been in the wrong place at the wrong time gives many pause, said Art Demarais, an Old North End resident.

"It scares people to think this young woman was living her life and now she's dead," Demarais said. "People want to believe there's something that could have been done better, even if there's no way something could have been done better."

Police have not revealed how Montgomery allegedly wound up in Winterbottom's car the night of the killing, but investigators have said in court papers that they could find no connection between Montgomery and the victim.

Cuddy said the majority of sexual assaults are committed by someone who is known to the victim -- a spouse, acquaintance, or family member. Only 3 percent of these crimes are committed by a stranger, she added.

Officers will not discuss specifics of the Winterbottom case during the forum, said Schirling, but are prepared to answer general questions. City officials and state legislators also are expected to attend the forum.

Among those planning to attend is Burlington Councilor Cheryl McDonough, who represents Ward 2 in the Old North End.

"People want to be reassured that public safety officials are doing everything they can to ensure their safety," McDonough said.

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