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Campus sees increase in nighttime safety measures

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After two crime alerts for hate crimes occurred near the University of Michigan's campus in Ann Arbor last month, Kinesiology sophomore Brianna Kennedy has started taking SafeRide, a free after-hours transportation system, every night to get home after a full night of studying — and she's not the only one taking extra precautions.

"(Walking home alone) is not something I would choose to do if I had the option not to with SafeRide or the bus," Kennedy said. "I would choose that over walking home because of the recent incidents and all that's been going on."

On the Friday after President-elect Donald Trump's win, a female Muslim student was approached by a man who demanded she take off her hijab, threatening to light her on fire if she refused. Days later, another female student was pushed down a hill after being ethnically intimidated on campus. As well, several incidents have occured that have not been sent out as alerts. Two weeks ago, an unknown man cut a woman's face with a safety pin on East Liberty Street, four men assaulted a University lecturer and an Ann Arbor resident found swastikas drawn on his door.

Since the incidents and the subsequent increased in student demand for more safety resources, SafeRide has expanded its usual 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. hours to 8 p.m. to 2 a.m., driving students within a one-mile radius of the Central and North campuses.

"I think it's helpful," Kennedy said. "Just with it being winter and the fact that it gets darker earlier. So (the new hours) keep in mind the students."

Steve Dolen, executive director of Logistics, Transportation and Parking, declined to cite the alerts as a reason for the expansion in hours in an e-mail interview.

"I couldn't speculate that (the ride increase was due to the fear from crime alerts)," he wrote. "The data doesn't show that."

Dolen wrote the new start time for SafeRide is a pilot and will be evaluated as it progresses.

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According to Dolen, SafeRide currently has three operating vans. While the University is not looking into adding a fourth van, he wrote that three vans have been enough to cover student demand. SafeRide is generally requested a thousand times per month and increases during the month of November when the weather starts to get colder.

SafeRide is not the only transportation system the University offers. Ride Home also runs from 2 a.m. to 7 a.m., providing free shared taxis from the Shapiro Undergraduate Library. State Street Ride functions as another service, transporting students to the South State Street Commuter, and runs from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. Monday through Friday.

Diane Brown, Division of Public Safety and Security spokeswoman, said SafeRide was derived from an earlier concept of SafeWalk, a campus accompaniment service for those who do not want to walk alone on campus at night, in the early 2000s. The University began offering rides in the SafeWalk program in 2001. She said there is talk of reviving the program again for the upcoming months, but they are not finalized.

Students have also been planning programs similar to SafeWalk, independently organizing walking systems and providing support to others after hours. Emma Kaye, an LSA and Business senior, had been planning for a buddy system night since the beginning of the year in hopes of spreading awareness about the prevalence of sexual assault on campus.

However, she said her plans changed due to the crime alerts on campus and her sense of heightened xenophobia on campus following the election.

“Part way through (the week of elections) ... we started getting those crime alerts and they were talking about things going on campus,” she said. “I think that sparked something within us and in our volunteers as well. Obviously, it is a horrifying thing; we felt like it became more about safety in general on campus rather than only about sexual assault.”

Trump’s win sparked negative reactions from many University students over worries about his campaign rhetoric, with multiple student protests on campus in the weeks following his victory. University President Mark Schlissel appeared at one of the events, applauding University students for overwhelmingly supporting Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton.

“Ninety percent of you rejected the kind of hate and the fractiousness and the longing for some kind of idealized version of a nonexistent yesterday that was expressed during the campaign,” Schlissel said during the November protest.

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male and female students in the pair. On their first night, she said, the group walked about 25 students home, the majority of them female.

“One of the greatest responses we got was from a guy who came and volunteered and what he said encompassed everything we wanted from the night too,” she said. “He said, ‘Look, as a man, I don’t deal with this or feel this fear. I don’t feel afraid walking on this campus and with everything going on now and especially as a white male, I don’t feel that.’ And he said it was extremely eye-opening to see how much people needed this and to feel to understand what other people went through even if it is a little bit.”

Kaye said even a student who declined to be walked home volunteered to help other students and expressed his gratitude for the service.

“I didn’t expect the response that it got,” she said. “Probably one of the greatest experiences I have had in this University was having my friends and even these people I didn’t know really back this up and show a lot of support.”

The group’s hope was to start a culture of supporting other students, making it a norm to walk others home and check up on friends regularly.

“It’s not that this one night was going to solve it,” she said. “It’s not. It was hoping to show that this is a problem. And even if a couple of people started asking if they want to be walked home and even to strangers, I would think that would be a success.”

She noted frustrations with current University services like SafeRide, saying she believed it to be a useful resource but, in her experience, there was a 30- to 40-minute wait time, leading some students to avoid the service.

Dolen wrote there is an application for SafeRide that was launched this fall that could aid the frustration of waiting for the ride. The app will also suggest other ways to get home that could be faster than the SafeRide.

“Another piece that we are just getting launched (in the application) is when you choose a ride it will also let you know when the next bus would be arriving and if it may be closer to you,” Dolen wrote. “So if the SafeRide van can’t be there in 15 minutes, there might be a bus and the bus stop would be just outside if you were to stay in Shapiro. There might be a bus getting there in 10 minutes and it is going pretty close to the same location.”

Evelyn Alsultany, associate professor of Arab and Muslim American Studies, is the head of the Islamophobia Working Group, another organization on campus aiming to make the walk home

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student wearing the hijab was threatened.

“After the recent hate crimes, we updated the resource list to include information on safe rides since many students are fearful of walking alone on campus, especially female students who wear the hijab,” Alsultany wrote in an email. “The Muslim Students’ Association is facilitating a system of walking in pairs and groups, especially at night.”

LSA junior Haleemah Aqel, part of the Islamophobia Working Group’s student initiative, said she is working with the Muslim Students’ Association representatives to create a walking system for those who feel unsafe walking home at night.

“We sent out reminders after the first crime alert like, ‘Hey, remember not to walk home at night. Make sure you are always walking home with a buddy,’ ” she said.

The MSA’s Facebook page currently has a list of phone numbers of students willing to walk people home.

“I am definitely hoping this is something we can keep for the future,” Aqel said. “I know that a lot of these initiatives have come out of aftermath of the election. But I think in general, safety should be considered. Whatever the politics and climate around our (campus) is, safety should always be something. Because who knows what could happen? Because this could be a great system for the future, maybe 10 years from now.”

Aqel said overall, the crime alerts were a sad reminder about the general sentiment toward Muslims in the United States.

“It’s sad to say I am not surprised that happened because of the climate not only on campus but in the U.S.,” she said. “Xenophobia is such a prevalent issue in our society. These instances are so ‘Wow I can’t believe this,’ but at the same time I can. It was bound to happen.”

Another organized effort to create walking systems, Wolverine Guard, has also launched in the past weeks and has a list of phone numbers on Facebook similar to MSA's approach.

Faculty have also gotten involved — a team of faculty recently launched Teamworks, a Canvas site that provides resources and support for students.

Anne Berg, assistant director of undergraduate studies and the organizer of Teamworks, said the site was created after a graduate student told her some of her students wouldn’t come to class the Friday after the election because they were too scared to be on campus. Berg said she attended post-election events to hear from students as well.

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terrified walking around campus — that was just after the woman was threatened. ... People were really, really raw in general."

Berg said she hopes Teamworks can stay in place for the long term. After presenting the idea to the administration, the site is set to be a trial run to see how students respond to it.

"(Students) said that something faculty monitored would give them a better sense of security because what students have done is quickly set up Facebook groups," she said.

The Canvas site currently has 30 members, most of whom are students.

Berg said building a community within Teamworks would help create a more comfortable space, adding that the team was interested in planning events to allow more networking. She added that she thought it was the job of students and faculty alike to keep both the walking system and the general climate of campus safe and supportive.

"I think what is really important in this political situation is that students of color, minority students, for whatever reason they feel, it is not upon them to stake their claims and be safe," she said. "But rather it is for everyone on campus to make sure we are a community and we belong together. And the type of rhetoric and actions has no place in Michigan. I think there really is a responsibility of students who do feel safe and faculty as well to offer themselves as a resource and to be there and say, 'This is our community and we are here to defend it. We won't let this destroy us.' "

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