

SANE Nursing in the Missouri DOC Helps Victims, Encourages Reporting

By Masonda Wheatley, RN, CCHP

Rape in prison is a reality that too often goes unreported. In Missouri's prison system, our sexual assault nurse examiner program is making victims more willing to report the crime, receive the forensic exam they are entitled to under the Prison Rape Elimination Act and get the medical and mental health attention they need.

Passed in 2003, PREA established national standards to prevent rapes of those incarcerated. The law also calls for mandatory reporting by anyone with information that a sexual assault has occurred. But in a prison setting, many victims are unwilling to come forward due to fears of stigmatization or threats of violence.

Corizon Health serves the health care needs of the 32,500 individuals incarcerated in the state's 22 prisons under a contract with the Missouri Department of Corrections. We learned of the positive benefits that a sexual assault nurse examiner brings to the rape exam experience and believed such services would be valuable to our patients and our state partner. In July 2015, I was assigned to work with our team to develop a statewide SANE prison program.

This proved a difficult task. I reached out to several states, but could find no similar program in a statewide prison setting to model or from which to seek guidance.

Colleagues working in the Philadelphia jail system had an established SANE nurse program and lent their expertise. Nevertheless, expanding to a statewide program and introducing a new approach to rape examinations required a lengthy process of program development, recruitment, staff training and inception. On Sept. 1, 2016, more than a year after we started, our team offered our first SANE nurse examination to our patients.

In our program, one of our 28 SANE-certified nurses responds to the facility where the victim is located. Previously, a sexual assault patient was taken to an outside provider to receive a SANE exam. At times this meant victims waited up to 12 hours, depending on the distance between the prison and the hospital and the availability of a SANE nurse at the hospital.

Benefits of a SANE Nurse Prison Program

On-site SANE exams benefit the victims of prison sexual assaults as well as the public. Our program is still young, but it is helping those who have been sexually assaulted feel more comfortable reporting the attack. Inmates are very observant and gossip spreads fast in a prison. Prior to our SANE program, inmates would be aware of patients leaving the facility. On-site SANE exams help protect patients' privacy, reducing the disincentive to reporting that comes with stigmatization or fears of violent reprisal.

Furthermore, our SANE nurses are also correctional nurses who work with patients on a daily basis within their normal job duties. At times the SANE nurse will know patients through past encounters during clinic or chronic care visits. Patients may be more trusting of a familiar nurse and be more forthcoming in discussing the event than they would with strangers.

The SANE nurses are part of a coordinated response that includes investigators, advocates and mental health professionals. Having the entire sexual assault response team under one roof facilitates the investigation and provides better continuity of care to the victim. The SANE nurse may directly schedule appointments for follow-up and STD prevention with the staff at the patient's assigned facility.

Other benefits of having the SANE nurse respond directly to the facility include the following:

- Patients can report sexual assaults without the trauma and potential embarrassment of reporting the details multiple times to multiple individuals.
- Patients are cared for by correctional nursing professionals trained to deal with this specific population.
- Minimizing off-site inmate transportation increases public safety.
- Facility staffing is not affected by transporting the patient to an outside hospital.

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Members of the SANE training in April (bottom) and May (top) 2016 at Corizon Health's Missouri Regional Office. Training was provided by Linda Ledray PhD, RN (top photo, standing at far left) of the Kinetic Learning's SANE-SART online program. Masonda Wheatley is standing at far left in the bottom photo.

How to Become a SANE Nurse

In Missouri, possessing an RN credential is the only requirement to become a SANE nurse, and RNs may simply obtain on-the-job training. However, Corizon Health decided that all SANE candidates must meet the following requirements:

- Be employed by Corizon Health in Missouri
- Hold a nonrestricted RN license
- Complete the Kinetic Learning SANE-SART 40-hour online program and receive certificate of completion
- Complete hands-on training for SANE exams
- Demonstrate skills competency

Challenges of Maintaining a SANE Program

Staffing has been one of the most significant challenges for the program. All SANE programs seem to have nurse retention issues, but they are exacerbated in the correctional setting where nursing turnover already is high. I am engaged in a continual cycle of recruitment and training.

A sustainable SANE program requires anticipating and preparing for turnover. Training a replacement may take six to 12 weeks. SANE certification is typically a 40-hour online self-study program followed by competency testing that the recruit must complete in addition to normal scheduled duties and outside commitments.

The prison environment itself poses several challenges, such as availability of supplies and access to patients. Equipment, such as syringes and flushes, is secured and counted. When working in the community, I have taken for granted the ease of obtaining supplies. In a prison, it can be a challenge to acquire a needed item simply because of the security measures that must be followed to retrieve supplies from another area of the facility.

In the community, patients are easily accessible. In the prison setting, patients may be in a locked cell and the correctional nurse may have to wait for custody staff to move the patient to an examination room or for an escort to a patient's location. Depending on what is occurring at the facility or the institution's security level, this may create a delay for the nurse to complete the task at hand.

What else is required to sustain a SANE program? This is something I think about frequently. Our program is only in its infancy, but I find myself thinking about its future and long-term sustainability. At \$2,000 to \$3,000 per nurse, the cost of training alone can take a large portion of budgeted funds. Requirements for length of employment prior to being accepted to the SANE nurse program can decrease the number of eligible applicants. I don't yet know the solutions, but I am optimistic that our committed team will overcome any obstacles that arise.

An Extension of Our Mission

Correctional nursing is challenging but highly rewarding work. Patients aren't always cooperative or honest with staff and sometimes have ulterior motives for seeking care. Nurses must provide care while being aware of their environmental surroundings.

But the reward is delivering care to appreciative patients with significant health needs who typically have had little access to care in the community. We play a vital role in turning around the lives of our patients, and our SANE nurse program is a natural extension of our mission to provide quality care to our patients.

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