

AG Schimel: SANE nurses critical to state's sexual assault response strategy

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MADISON, Wis. – International Forensic Nurses are being celebrated around the globe this month and Attorney General Brad Schimel, who has made supporting victims of sexual assault one of his top priorities, is highlighting the Wisconsin Department of Justice's (DOJ) Medical Forensics Program, which trains nurses to become Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE). SANE nurses perform the medical forensic exam following a sexual assault.

“When I was elected attorney general, I pledged to make Wisconsin’s sexual assault nurse examiner training program more robust, because these nurses are critical to a community’s ability to provide survivors of sexual assault dignified, compassionate care and treatment,” said Attorney General Schimel. “The forensic nurses in our state have been essential in helping DOJ implement a system response to sexual assault and in getting previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits inventoried and tested.”

“Under the leadership of Brad Schimel, DOJ has been a champion for survivors of sexual assault, making sure that with every decision, survivors’ needs come first,” said Deanna Grundl, President of the Wisconsin Chapter of the International Association of Forensic Nurses (WI-AFN). “DOJ has worked closely with organizations such as ours, through the Attorney General’s Sexual Assault Response Team to gather input on how to improve processes. Furthermore, the DOJ has played a key role in educating forensic nurses by helping defray the cost of hospital educational

programs. We feel, through the leadership of Brad Schimel, the Wisconsin DOJ is a valuable partner in helping nurses do their jobs each and every day. The WI-IAFN does not work independently with DOJ, but collaboratively along with them, advocacy, and law enforcement.”

DOJ has been training SANE nurses since 2014, including 161 nurses in adult sexual assault exams; 45 nurse in pediatric sexual assault exams; and 88 nurses in both adult and pediatric sexual assault exams.

In May 2015, Attorney General Schimel hired a SANE coordinator to strengthen the state’s only in-person SANE nurse training program and increased required training hours from 40 hours to 46 hours, including training in victim responses, crisis intervention, collaboration with community agencies, and medicolegal specimen collection, documentation, and photography. The SANE nurse training program has also been expanded to include human trafficking, adverse childhood experiences, mock trial, and photo case studies.

The SANE Coordinator works closely with the DOJ Bureau of Training & Standards staff, the DOJ Victim Services Training Officer, WI-AFN, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA), and medical facilities and training faculty to create SANE programs around the state and to provide consistent training standards and information regarding the SANE program.

SANE nurses are critical to the Attorney General’s Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). In 2015, a group of SANE nurses and Wisconsin State Crime Laboratory (WSCL) staff collaborated to re-design a medical-forensic evidence collection process that would be comprehensive and consistent across the state of Wisconsin. This updated kit featured a “head to toe” collection sequence that is more compatible with the head to toe physical exam, easing the stress of the exam on the survivor. After prototypes were developed and approved, the WSCL began providing the new kits to hospitals and law enforcement agencies free of charge.

In 2016, the SART established a new protocol for when a survivor presents for a SANE exam. The SART recommended that a patient/survivor be offered the option to have a forensic exam conducted regardless of whether or not they wanted to report the assault to law enforcement. Prior to the new protocol, if a patient/survivor didn’t want to report to law enforcement at that time, a kit would not be collected. Whereas if the patient/survivor did want to report to law enforcement, a kit would be collected immediately. However, there are many times when the patient/survivor

does not know if they want to report. Deciding to engage with law enforcement can be a very intimidating concept, especially following the trauma of an assault.

Under this new protocol, a patient/survivor can have a forensic exam conducted and the collected kit will be sent directly to the WSCL for storage. The WSCL will hold the kit for up to 10 years, which is the statute of limitations on second and third degree sexual assaults in Wisconsin. If at any point in those 10 years the survivor wants to report the assault to law enforcement, the law enforcement agency can request the kit be tested.

SANE programs across the state are also key partners in completing the Wisconsin Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (WiSAKI), a statewide effort to address the accumulation of unsubmitted sexual assault kits in the possession of local law enforcement agencies and hospitals. SANE program nurses helped report and inventory sexual assault kits being held by hospitals and other medical facilities in the state, and worked with the WiSAKI team at DOJ to collect those previously unsubmitted kits and prepare them for testing.

DOJ's SANE nurse training program is part of the agency's Office of Crime Victim Services (OCVS), and is funded through the U.S. Department of Justice's STOP (Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors) Violence Against Women Formula grant.