

Providing Care, Compassion, and Justice

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Statewide SANE shortage leaves gaps in medical care

Texas is a state with 600+ hospitals, 71 children's advocacy centers, and more than 320,000 registered nurses. Yet as of 2017, of those registered nurses, there were only 374 Office of the Attorney General (OAG) certified sexual assault nurse examiners (SANE). That is 0.14% of registered nurses. The Texas Department of Public Safety reported 18,750 victims of sexual assault in 2017, yet many weren't examined by a SANE because of a lack of access and the SANE staff shortage.

Fortunately for child victims in Williamson County, the Williamson County Children's Advocacy Center (WCCAC) has five SANEs who can provide forensic medical exams. But that's not the case for every advocacy center, as Kerrie Stannell, WCCAC's executive director can attest. "In my

experience, it can be difficult for other children's advocacy centers to find enough SANEs to provide medical exams," Kerrie says. "It's tough around Texas to find enough SANEs. The hospital near the center I was at before couldn't maintain enough SANEs to keep their program going."

SANEs are trained to show victims compassion while objectively conducting medical forensic exams; identifying, collecting, and documenting evidence from patients; coordinating follow-up care; and providing courtroom testimony as expert witnesses, protecting victims from the hearsay rule. "I've witnessed cases that wouldn't have been prosecuted if it hadn't been for what the child told only to the SANE," Kerrie says.

Since SANEs are so important and in demand, why aren't there more of them? WCCAC's Deborah Kleypas (CA-CPSANE, SANE-A, SANE-P) may have an answer. "Nurses that go into a SANE program may not truly understand their role as forensic nurses and what's expected of them, resulting in high turnover," Deborah explains. "The nurses become certified but opt to not recertify because they weren't comfortable with the trauma experienced by sexual assault patients. Other nurses decided they didn't like going to court."

The time and cost associated with obtaining certification is also a consideration. There are two SANE certification levels for two certifying agencies. The OAG certifies nurses for CA-SANE (adults and adolescents) and CP-SANE (pediatrics). Nurses must take an OAG-approved 80-hour SANE Training Course, complete 100 hours of clinical training, perform 16 hours of in person courtroom observation, and then apply for certification with the OAG.

Alternatively, a nurse may complete IAFN-approved classroom training, log 40 hours of contact and didactic clinical training, and finish a preceptorship before taking a test to become board certified by the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN). There are two certification levels: SANE- A for adults and adolescents and SANE- P for pediatrics. SANEs must recertify every two years for OAG recertification and every three years for board certification with IAFN.

This is a significant investment of time, considering that a traditional ER nurse could just take two hours of mandatory training to training to collect evidence. But those medical professionals won't be SANE-certified, won't be considered expert witnesses, and may not provide the reassuring, compassionate care sexual assault victims need. A SANE's work is fraught with emotionally-charged situations and high expectations, but those nurses that endure provide invaluable support to victims, law enforcement, and society.

Thanks to a grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Texas A&M College of Nursing is recruiting nurses for SANE training and providing hope that victims in underserved areas will soon gain access to much-needed medical help to move forward with their life and to bring their perpetrators to justice.

To learn more about SANE certification, visit texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/files/divisions/crime-victims/SANE-Certification-Initial-Application-Guide.pdf or iafntexaschapter.com/certification. To support the Williamson County Children's Advocacy Center's fight against child sexual abuse, visit wilcocac.org.