



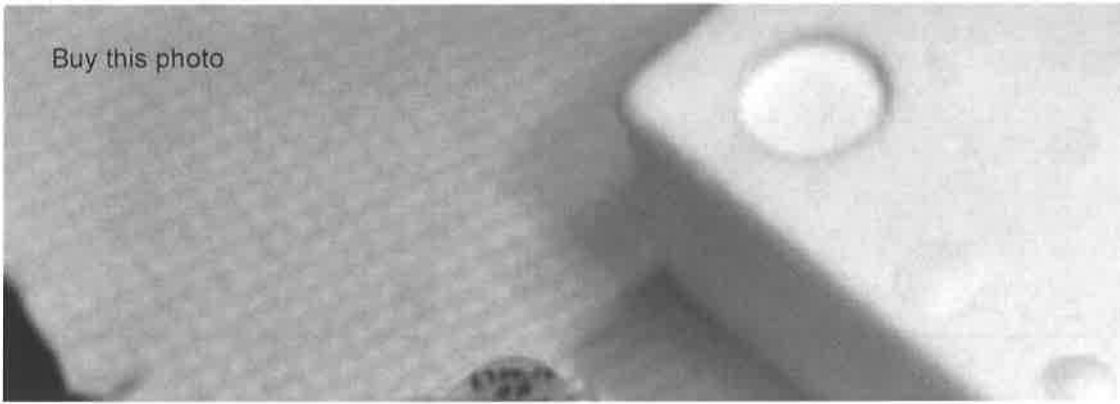
# Wanted: sexual assault nurses, now

It's a problem prevalent in rural Oregon: The lack of sexual assault and rape cases means nurses often don't meet the requirements to maintain their SANE rape-kit certification.

By • **The Daily Astorian**

Published on August 6, 2014 10:16AM





### Levels of SANE training, certification

**Training:** A nurse who has received the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) training can perform a Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence (SAFE) kit, or rape kit as it is commonly called. That training for Oregon State is 40 hours. They must also prove competence in the field, which often equals certification.

**Certification:** A nurse must complete 10 speculum exams, three sexual assault forensic exams and a law enforcement ride-along or case review. They must also observe court proceedings, an advocacy program and the workings of a district attorney's office.

**Recertification:** To recertify and keep the certification current, they must perform three sexual assault exams,

Picture this: a little girl, her mother, and a younger sibling.

It's 3 in the morning, and a uniformed officer is driving them away from their home.

It would be more than two hours on the road before they would get to their destination: a hospital in Portland where the 10-year-old could be examined by a professional.

Examined because she had been raped.

From the time of the incident, which occurred around midnight, it would be more than 10 hours after the attack before the family was alone again – made longer by the four-hour round-trip car ride in the company of police.

But that's what happens when a child is raped in Clatsop County, where no certified Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE) exist.

"It's unacceptable and something that we shouldn't have to put the victim through," said Astoria Police Chief Pete Curzon.

A SANE nurse is a forensic nurse who is certified to perform a sexual assault kit, or a rape kit, to preserve physical evidence on victims. The kit includes swabs for semen or bodily fluids, as well as collection of fibers, hairs and saliva.

Rape kits are vital to law enforcement and prosecution of sexual crimes, but they must be completed within 84 hours of an incident. A SANE-trained or SANE-certified nurse can complete the kit on a victim, but without certification may not have the level of experience and expertise to treat a victim of a sexual crime. Only a certified nurse with additional certification for minors can treat those under 15 years of age. Not one of those exist in the county.

The law and certification

The Oregon SANE Certification Commission was established by the Attorney General in 2004. Oregon is one of only seven states that offer state-level SANE certification. According to [Oregonsatf.org](http://Oregonsatf.org), there are 132 certified nurses in the state. But 14 counties do not have them, according to the site's certification list.

15 speculum exams and have 25 contact hours of relevant clinical or nonclinical education or activities annually.

To work with children younger than 15: To be certified as a pediatric SANE nurse, a nurse must complete training through the international program in that category. The SANE program coordinator with the state's task force estimates there are only six in the state.

Those counties include Columbia, Douglas and Josephine County. Umatilla and Polk County don't have one either. All despite the fact that in 2011, employing or contracting with a SANE nurse became a part of Oregon State Law.

Section 147.403 outlines that all hospitals, emergency medical service providers, intermediate care facilities, skilled nursing facilities, long-term care facilities and residential care facilities in this state that perform forensic medical examinations of sexual assault patients shall "employ or contract with at least one sexual assault forensic examiner who has completed didactic training sufficient to satisfy the training requirement for certification by the Oregon SAE/SANE Certification Commission established by the Attorney General."

But the Oregon statute does not require hospitals to have their SANE nurses certified, said Trece Gurrad, chief clinical officer for Columbia Memorial Hospital.

"It does require hospitals to employ or contract with at least one person who has completed SANE training for adult victims," she said. "CMH employs three SANE-trained nurses and is therefore compliant with the statute."

Columbia Memorial Hospital SANE-trained nurses have treated 10 sexual assault victims in the last 15 months, according to Gurrad. Those victims were over the age of 15. And the nurse was not certified.

"I really do not see a significant benefit of certification over training other than perhaps a higher volume of cases thus more experience," Gurrad said.

At Providence Seaside Hospital, there are five SANE-trained nurses. None of those are certified either.

The issue in Clatsop County is not unique. Rural communities elsewhere are also experiencing a lack of certified nurses. Justin Nelson, Morrow County district attorney, said the absence of a SANE nurse is affecting their county, as well.

"Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners are an integral part of sexual assault investigations," Nelson said. "SANEs have specialized training that help with both the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault cases. The lack of SANEs in rural parts of Oregon should be a concern for the public."

"They've had SANE nurses here before, but they can't meet the exam requirements for their certification, so they either lapse or go somewhere else and find employment elsewhere," Astoria Deputy Chief Brad Johnston said. "The number of SANE nurses that the state's website indicates, it's pretty minimal. The majority of them are in metro-area hospitals. So there's obviously an issue, not just for us but throughout the smaller counties in the state."

To meet the state requirements, the Oregon State Board of Nursing says a nurse does not have to be certified but rather must receive 40 hours of training that the Sexual Assault Task Force provides, according to task force SANE Program Coordinator Robin Olafson. The nurse must then also prove competence in that area. That is where the certification comes in, Olafson said.

"The most reliable and best way to prove competence is to have the certification," she said.

To receive SANE certification, a nurse must complete 10 speculum exams, three sexual assault forensic exams and a law enforcement ride-along or case review. They must also observe court proceedings, an advocacy program and the workings of a district attorney's office.

To recertify and keep the certification current, they must perform three sexual assault exams, 15 speculum exams and have 25 contact hours of relevant clinical or nonclinical education or activities annually.

The International Association of Forensic Nursing (IAFN), which allows a SANE nurse to practice anywhere, also provides certification. That certification requires 360 hours of relevant nursing practice in the sexual assault field. The nurse must then also pass a test.

## **Pediatrics**

But SANE-certified nurses are only allowed to treat someone age 15 or older. A SANE-P, for pediatrics, is required in order to treat a victim under that age. IAFN is the only agency that can certify a SANE-P. But there are only six SANE-P nurses in the state, Olafson estimates, and two who are actually practicing.

So when a SANE-P is not available, which Olafson believes was the case for the 10-year-old victim in Astoria last month, a SANE nurse can perform the exam with an emergency pediatrics physician, someone who is dually board-certified in both emergency and pediatric care.

"Kids deserve expert care," Olafson said. "With the pediatrics population, both with anatomy and with mental health, it is extremely different."

Gurrad echoed those sentiments. While adults are often referred to The Harbor, formerly known as the Women's Resource Center, for counseling and support, child victims are referred to the nearest child abuse or advocacy center when a sexual crime occurs.

## **The Lighthouse**

In Clatsop County, that's the Lighthouse for Children.

The Lighthouse for Children is one of the state assessment centers for various forms of child abuse. It provides non-acute assessments of children from ages 4 to 15.

Those assessments can be in relation to physical neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, or other issues, generally referred to the Lighthouse by the Department of Human Services or law enforcement. The Lighthouse does not do any forensic exams.

Dr. Roy Little, a medical examiner with The Lighthouse, says the organization works to give an evaluation of a child, interview them and "try to understand what might or might not have happened to them." He also says they work with family and medical history, interview the parents and do a full physical examination, except for in the event of an acute sexual assault or rape.

Those children are taken directly to a hospital and often referred to CARES in Portland or Randall Children's Hospital, a part of Legacy Emanuel Medical Center.

In a small community, that's the standard of care and appropriate process, Little said.

"The pediatric SANE nurse program has a very rigorous and demanding certification process and recertification process – very demanding," Little said. "What it really means is that it is a certification that's just not going to be able to happen in a small rural facility. It's not going to happen here on the coast, or in Redmond or in Joseph, and so on. Those

communities are not going to attract and maintain and provide the volume of cases to achieve certification or to become recertified. It's almost impossible."

Clatsop County Deputy District Attorney Ron Brown said, locally, they are working on resolving the issue. Although he declined to say what that entails, he expressed his hope that one of a few options being explored would be put in place within the next month or two.

"This is something that's just not workable right now," Brown said. "It's too hard on the victims, when they've just been through a traumatic event and they're looking for help, not looking to be told they need to drive to Portland for two hours, to an unknown place with unknown people."

### **Other communities**

Clatsop County is not the only county dealing with this issue.

"At this time, we do not have a SANE nurse, per se," said Douglas County district attorney Rick Wesenberg. "What we have are Sexual Assault Trained (SAT) nurses. They perform the exam, but the pelvic portion of it is still done by medical doctors."

Wesenberg said the local hospital is in the process of getting some grants to reacquire SANEs. Two were formerly serving the county; however, one moved away, and another was promoted to administration. While SANE nurses are able to do the whole rape kit exam without involving a physician if the victim is over the age of 15, he said the current situation is satisfactory from a prosecution standpoint.

"We're happy with the level of service provided to the victims," he said.

Harney County District Attorney Tim Colahan said that while they do not have a SANE-certified nurse, there are SANE-trained nurses locally, just like Clatsop County. When a sexual assault occurs within the county, Harney has a memorandum of understanding with St. Charles Hospital in Bend for examinations.

"Victims are transported to Bend by our victim advocate," Colahan said. "We are working with local partners, including the Burns Paiute Tribe, to have a certified SANE available."

The drive to Bend is more than two hours from Burns, where Harney District Hospital is located.

Nelson said Morrow County often transports victims to Hermiston for their examinations, which is only a 30-minute trip. However, it was discovered Hermiston doesn't have a SANE-certified nurse, either. Good Shepard Medical Center says they have nurses with SANE training, but do not have any certified. They are working on their certification, a spokesman said Thursday.

In Grant County, "we had a SANE nurse until just recently," District Attorney Ryan Joslin said. "Her certification lapsed because she was unable to complete the required number of exams in a year, as we just didn't have the number of cases for her to work on. So, we do not currently have a SANE nurse."

For Clatsop County residents, the only option is to take sexual assault victims to the nearest hospital that has a SANE nurse on staff. Sometimes, particularly when the resident is a minor, that means calling several hospitals in the Portland-area to find one.

"If you look at this from the perspective of the victim, they've just gone through this horrific event, and now they have to sit and wait while we call around and find where we can schedule (an exam) and where a SANE nurse is available, and what time. And then transport them there. Then they have to wait to be examined, and then we have to drive them back," Curzon said, noting that it takes time not only for travel and the exam, but also the packaging of the evidence to be sent back with police.

"It just adds to the event. We should be able to just take them down to CMH."

### Hitting home

Astoria Police said the issue has affected at least one other family dramatically in the last two months. A 14-year-old reported a rape, but when told she'd have to go to Portland – officers offered her and her mother a ride – the family refused. Without the evidence, there was no case.

Had there been a SANE-P or a SANE-certified nurse locally, things might have been different, police say.

"I couldn't tell you the last time we had a SANE nurse in the county, because when there is one, we don't notice it. We only notice the absence of it," Astoria Deputy Police Chief Brad Johnston said. In the last 10 months, he said, that absence has become a real problem. "For us, the (state) requirement to have a SANE nurse was not important until there wasn't one. Quite frankly, we didn't really know the logistics of that."

Johnston also pointed to the number of sodomy, sexual penetration with an object and sexual abuse cases in Clatsop County that aren't usually assumed to require a rape kit, since it isn't a definitive rape, but can still constitute the exam. In 2014 alone, there were nearly 30 cases like those reported in Clatsop County.

"Typically when we think of these things, we think of actual rape, and that's the only time that you would need this kind of an exam," Johnston said of the need for a SANE nurse. "Certainly, our numbers countywide are not sufficient to meet those requirements. But if we start looking at a larger picture of sex crimes in general, there are many other crimes that the hospital may not think of as a crime that this evaluation could be conducted on; an investigator may not even think of it, but they certainly are in the larger picture of sex crimes. There are other things that we ought to be doing these exams on that would help on this issue of the number of exams a nurse has to have."

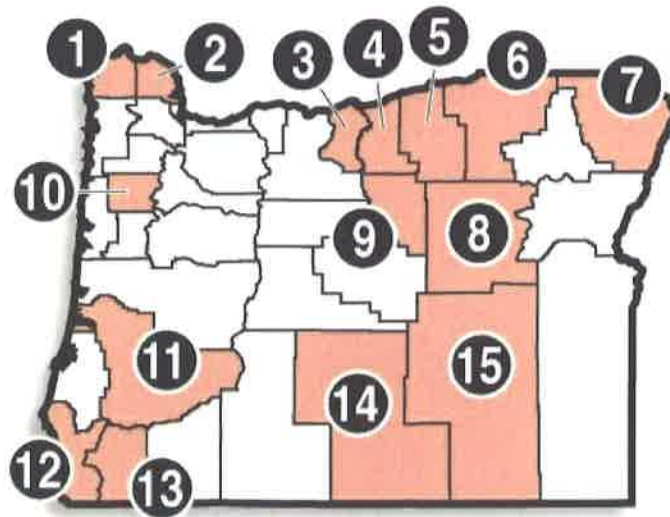
State House Rep. Sara Gelsler, D-Corvallis, had brought forward a similar program for victims of child abuse into legislation, closely resembling the SANE nurse requirement.

While the SANE nurse law was introduced by former Attorney General Hardy Myers in the late 1990s, and brought about the task force, Gelsler, who is running for state Senate, has since introduced a program for child-abuse medical examinations. That program is also experiencing similar challenges in rural communities, she explained.

"They're training in recognizing the signs, and they know how to talk to the victims," she said of the examiners. "But there is some of the same problems in that process where victims sometimes have to travel a couple of hours to get to an exam.

"And that's really not acceptable, whether you're a child that's 6 or a rape victim that's 25."

# Oregon counties with no SANE certified nurses



- |             |               |
|-------------|---------------|
| 1. Clatsop  | 9. Wheeler    |
| 2. Columbia | 10. Polk      |
| 3. Sherman  | 11. Douglas   |
| 4. Gilliam  | 12. Curry     |
| 5. Morrow   | 13. Josephine |
| 6. Umatilla | 14. Lake      |
| 7. Wallowa  | 15. Harney    |
| 8. Grant    |               |
- Source: OregonSATF.org

Daily Astorian graphic