

SANE marking 10 years of service

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The Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program is marking a decade of service in the Strait region. In a recent interview, Heather Blackburn reflected on the program's evolution. "I always describe its development as this beautiful example of how the acute care system and community can work together to create something meaningful," the SANE program co-ordinator said. The SANE program built upon the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre's (AWRC's) work in providing services for survivors of sexualized violence.

"I have heard stories about how disconnected victims of sexual assault felt, having to navigate themselves through really big systems — like healthcare and criminal justice — without anyone there to guide them," Blackburn said of, other than AWRC, the lack of services. "They'd often feel like they weren't met, all the time, with compassion and understanding."

She noted, at the same time, Dr. Maureen Allen of the St. Martha's Regional Hospital emergency room was identifying there must be "a better way of doing this."

Prior to SANE, physicians conducted sexual assault examinations. "They would have to leave a busy ER to conduct these exams, and they often weren't triaged in the way that they are now, so victims could feel like their needs weren't as important and they were made to wait for really long times," Blackburn said.

Continuing to grow

In 2006, spearheaded by strong community support and financial support from the federal and provincial governments, SANE was created. After nurses were hired and trained, they started providing service in the spring of 2007. "We are an acute service for survivors of sexual violence over the age of 13," Blackburn said, while elaborating on the 'acute service' aspect. "We provide medical forensic care to anyone who has recently been sexually assaulted, so a sexual assault that has occurred within the last five days. 'We provide, first and foremost, trauma-informed care that's safe, compassionate and non-judgemental,'" she added. Blackburn noted sexual violence is a crime that victims tend to internalize.

"It is really disempowering — you are taking that power and autonomy away from people," she said. SANE provides as many options as possible. "They are given space and time to make choices that are going to make sense for them," Blackburn said.

Whether someone phones SANE's 24-hour line or arrives at an ER, Blackburn said they are asked if they want a program nurse called. If a SANE nurse is brought in, she provides further options.

"Maybe I just want to have an informed person hear my story," Blackburn said, in outlining those possibilities.

She noted the people involved — often adolescents and young adults — have little experience with the health and criminal justice systems.

"They just want someone to let them know — 'I believe you, I believe this happened to you; I can support you in these kinds of ways and I can connect you to other people,'" Blackburn said.

The nurse will complete a medical forensic exam, including an assessment of any injuries that require treatment. They are recorded, as well as evidence collected, to support a potential criminal investigation. "For people who want to report to the police, right away, we can facilitate that; hand that evidence over, immediately, to start that criminal investigation," Blackburn said. She noted people "often don't know what they want to do," considering the effect of such a trauma. Because of that, Blackburn said the SANE nurses want to ensure those measures take place, particularly the collection and preservation of biological evidence.



Heather Blackburn is the Sexual assault nurse examiner program co-ordinator.

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"Once you have had a couple days or some weeks, or for some people months, of healing and support, you can make a truly informed decision as to whether or not to involve the police and engage the criminal justice system," she added. If the criminal route is pursued, SANE nurses can testify.

"Both as a factual witness — what we have seen, what we collected and our processes — and as an expert," Blackburn said.

The SANE nurse will also provide emergency contraception and antibiotics to protect against STIs.

SANE has 14 registered nurses with the required specialized training, including three that have been with the program since its inception, who serve at the AWRC, St. Martha's Regional, Strait Richmond, Guysborough Memorial and Aberdeen Regional hospitals. "Our catchment area is pretty much most of northeastern Nova Scotia," Blackburn noted.

Noting the strength of the team, she said she is "very, very proud of the work that we all do together."

"You need someone that is aware of the issue of sexualized violence that can really make a therapeutic, non-judgemental, compassionate connection with someone really quickly, but also can tolerate the visible wounding that happens when someone has been exposed to this kind of violence," Blackburn said.

She added the nurses are "very dedicated," describing their commitment as "amazing."

Delivering the message

As part of SANE's effort, Blackburn talked about the importance of being out in the community and "raising awareness of

not only our services, but also participating in anti-violence work."

"It is important to believe survivors, when they come forward with their stories, so we do a lot of community engagement and education with a broad range of people from middle and high school aged students to community groups and professionals," she said.

Although there has been a "broadening awareness" in recent years in the province, including more conversations about sexual violence and consent, Blackburn said much work remains. "There are still challenges around victim-blaming and how we socialize boys and girls to think about sexuality and consent."

"Nevertheless, I do think we have made inroads. When I am working with, say students going into their freshman year at university, they do seem to have a lot more language around consent and understand some of the gray areas that make it difficult to understand," she added.

Blackburn noted youth interest in hav-

ing conversations about their "own experiences of sexualized violence" continues to increase. "I still think that we have a long way to go," she said. First and foremost, the goal is to have people "stop committing and perpetrating sexualized violence."

Blackburn noted achieving such a "huge cultural shift" will take generations.

"While we are working towards that, we really want to make sure that anyone who discloses sexual violence is believed, supported and has access to services and support to help them; not just in the immediate, but also long-term, because that road to recovery can take a lifetime," she said.

Everyone's issue

In achieving those goals, including that cultural shift, Blackburn agreed everyone can do their part. "When I am talking to community and professional groups, I often start by saying that sexual violence is everyone's issue," she said, noting that one in three Canadian women, one in six Canadian men and one in two trans-identified people will experience sexualized violence.