

# Shortage: ‘We only have a handful of nurses who are trained to do this’

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wanted to address eight-hour wait times for exams at local hospitals and improve the low reporting rates for sexual assault.

They launched the Jackson County Sexual Assault Response Team, a non-profit that educates and trains nurses to contract to hospitals.

“We decided the gold standard would be a strictly on-call program that would respond to the hospitals, but was not associated with the hospitals,” Moen said.

The response team employs between 13 and 16 nurses at a time, allowing for 24/7 on-call coverage with response times under 30 minutes in Jackson County. The program recently expanded to Josephine County.

Nurses are typically on call for 48 hours a month. Moen said she limits burnout by paying well and giving nurses sufficient time off.

“I’m paying somebody to sit around and wait for a phone call that might never come. That’s a really hard thing for folks outside of these systems to understand. I mean, our program is about \$220,000 a year. That’s a huge amount of money,” she said.

The majority of the response team is funded by grants, foundations and donations, including money from the Victims of Crime Act.

“I would hope that programs coming in now would be able to actually get the hospitals to provide the majority of the funding. Unfortunately, I didn’t know better when we started, so my pitch to the hospitals was, ‘Oh, this won’t cost you anything,’” she said.

The response team does an average of 11 exams a month.

Before the program launched, around 40% of survivors who came to hospitals reported their assault to law enforcement. Now, that rate ranges between 85% to 95%.

“Having that first contact of the system be somebody who can walk into that room and say, ‘I’m really sorry, and I’m here just for you,’ and answer all of their questions, and give them reassurance that they’re OK, and get the medications and get them resources and connect them to whatever they need afterwards, it is so crucial.

“I truly think it makes a huge difference in how the rest of their journey unfolds. Just kinder, gentler first contact,” Moen said.

Powell, who works with the attorney general’s sexual assault task force, said she’s not sure if a similar program would be realistic on the North Coast given the region’s staffing challenges.

“It would be nice to have, in each com-



Lydia Ely/The Astorian

A sexual assault nurse examiner cart contains materials to gather evidence.

munity, a couple of SANE nurses who could travel to other hospitals. Someone who’s in Columbia County, someone who’s in Clatsop County, someone who’s in Tillamook County, that if they are available and they would have a network to communicate,” she said. “Just so the patient doesn’t have to drive, that would be ideal.”

While more robust state and grant funding would be beneficial, Powell said hospitals are in the most immediate position to address the issue. She recognizes that many smaller, rural hospitals have budget constraints.

“So it kind of puts a little bit of weight on the ethics of it,” she said. “Ethically, we need to take care of these patients in our community and these survivors, and so, are we willing to put funding there as kind of a charitable aspect of the hospital?”

### ‘It’s something the community needs’

The Harbor, hoping to increase the number of sexual assault nurse examiners, has applied for a \$750,000 federal grant from the Office on Violence Against Women to train midwives at the Astoria Birth Center.

The nonprofit will find out this fall whether it will receive the grant.

Local hospitals have been making an effort to improve availability. Three nurses at Columbia Memorial and two nurses at Providence Seaside are training to become certified.

“The (sexual assault nurse examiner) program at Providence Seaside has a formal connection to, and the support of, the Providence medical forensic program based in Portland to ensure access to ongoing training opportunities and 24/7/365

telephone consultations with a goal of increasing access to sexual assault services within our community,” Mike Antrim, the communications manager for Providence Seaside, said in an email to The Astorian.

Casseopia Fisher, a nurse supervisor, is in training for certification at Columbia Memorial.

Working as a supervisor, Fisher said she saw the need and decided to help despite knowing the intensity.

“It doesn’t feel to me like it’s hard to necessarily hear these sometimes very sad and potentially frightening stories as long as I feel like I could come into that situation and make a difference in and help improve it,” she said.

Fisher started by taking the national 40-hour online course while recovering from a minor surgery in 2018. Since then, she has taken the state sexual assault task force’s weeklong course and built experience under mentorship.

While training at Columbia Memorial, Fisher can collect evidence kits, but cannot do the pelvic exam, which is often the most uncomfortable for patients. If a survivor chooses to have one performed, which can sometimes be beneficial for building a criminal case, Fisher must ask a physician to do it.

“We have really great physicians at the hospital, and they’re all very compassion-

ate people. But sometimes it’s difficult if I’ve just been working with somebody for a really long time and we’ve built some trust together for me to bring somebody else into that to do what is oftentimes the most difficult piece of the exam,” she said.

When she collects evidence kits, Fisher lets survivors know that every part is optional. She gives recommendations, but asks for consent every step along the way.

“The biggest, most important thing that I want people to know is that they’re in control. Because they’ve just experienced something where they didn’t have control, and giving that back to them is probably the most important thing I can do,” she said.

Certification requires an average of 16 hours a month in relevant practice, court observations and meetings with law enforcement, the district attorney’s office and advocacy organizations. It also requires demonstrating competence as outlined by the hospital. With the county’s low reporting rates for sexual assault, it can be difficult to get training within the community.

Dr. Regina Mysliwiec, the emergency department director at Columbia Memorial, who is also on the sexual assault nurse examiner certification board, said budget and burnout are the biggest obstacles to local availability.

“These survivors of assault are coming to the department on their own, or they’re being brought in by police. They’re traumatized. They just want it all to go away. They want it to be over. And then what we have to do is find a way to take care of them as quickly as possible. And limit the trauma as much as possible,” Mysliwiec said. “But we only have a handful of nurses who are trained to do this process.”

Fisher was the nurse who collected the two evidence kits taken at Columbia Memorial so far this year. She was called in a third time, but the patient left before she could get there several hours later.

“I personally have had to call Cassie in to do these exams just after she finished working. I imagine her sitting down to have dinner with her family and then just picking up the phone,” Mysliwiec said. “It’s asking a lot, but it’s something the community needs.”



**The Harbor would like to say thank you to all the donors who made this year’s Soup Bowl a success!**

**Because of your generosity, we can continue to offer our services for free to survivors of domestic and sexual violence in Clatsop County.**

**Thank you to Richard Rowland, Master Potter and his team of volunteers for 20 years of support, none of this would be possible without you!**

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