

## Nursing



## Too Long Neglected

Help is on the way for rape victims in rural areas.

Florida International University has launched a new program to train nurses to perform forensic exams of sexual assault survivors in rural areas.

The program — a partnership between the Nicole Wertheim College of Nursing and Health Sciences and the Global Forensic and Justice Center at FIU — teaches nurses how to collect DNA evidence, tend to patients' physical and emotional needs and become expert witnesses in civil or criminal trials.

To qualify, students must have at least two years of experience as a registered nurse in an emergency room or in obstetrics and gynecology. Students receive 40 hours of classroom instruction and 10 hours of clinical training before getting certified as sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs).

The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration awarded a

\$1.5-million grant to FIU to establish the program in underserved parts of the state. The training is free for students. "We pay for their training, their test-taking and anything they might need so that it's of no cost to them," says the grant's principal investigator, Tami

Thomas, associate dean of research at the college.

FIU plans to train about 30 SANEs for hospitals and health clinics in Hendry and Glades counties, as well as Belle Glade and Sweetwater, by 2022. The first cohort of trainees was certified and sent to Hendry Regional Medical Center this fall.

For years, Hendry Regional had operated without a SANE, meaning rape victims might wait hours — or even days — to be seen by a sexual assault nurse examiner. The SANE would either drive in from another county or police would drive the patient to the closest available SANE in Fort Myers or Miami. "I've heard stories of women having to wait not just three or four hours, but 24, 36 and 48 hours," Thomas says.

The FIU program also includes ongoing support for SANEs, including monthly group meetings and access to a psychiatric nurse practitioner. "If you're examining survivors of sexual assault, there are things you can't un-see or un-hear or un-see," she says.

Many SANEs quit after two years because of overwork and burnout, she adds. "They may see a particularly violent or awful case and have no one to talk to," she says. "It's a very, very hard job."

— By Amy Martinez

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