



Sex Assault Response Team Still Helping

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By ALISHA SEMCHUCK, Valley Press Staff Writer asemchuck@avpress.com

LANCASTER, CA - From the start of the year to date, forensic nurses at the Antelope Valley Hospital Sexual Assault Response Team Center examined 89 attack victims and documented their cases, officials said. That statistic hasn't changed in a year, according to Mary Reina, the center's director.

She said the Antelope Valley has the highest number of reported sex crimes throughout Los Angeles County.

"We're right now at our average, compared to last year," **Mary Reina** said.

In all, 130 patients came to the hospital's emergency room by early August to report they were victims of sexual assault. But in order for law enforcement officials to authorize a rape kit, the assault had to occur within 120 hours, she said.

"That's the guide," Mary Reina said. Within that time, the forensic nurses can collect biological evidence, and physical injury such as bruises that will still be visible, she explained.

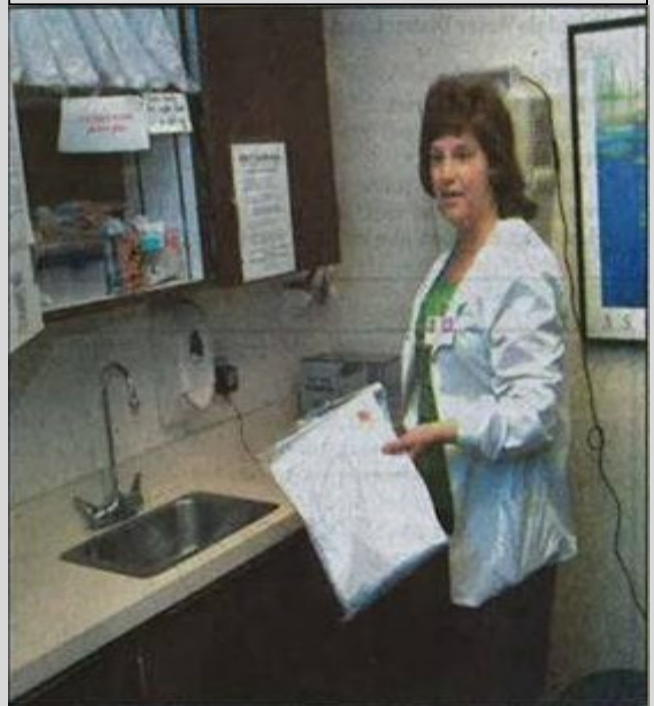
Just because victims didn't get to the hospital in the first 120 hours doesn't mean they're neglected.

"Advocates saw all 130. They get called in for every case," Reina said.

Those advocates come from the Sexual Assault Response Services, a program formerly run by Antelope Valley Hospital, which in November came under the auspices of Valley Oasis, the agency that operates shelters for battered spouses and their children. Reina said that transition has been smooth.

"We never stopped services, not even a day," said Liza Rodriguez, the program director for SARS at Valley Oasis. "We work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We have a hot line, (800) 723-RAPE, or (800) 723-7273."

Picture Was Scanned from the Printed Newspaper



RON SIDDLE / Valley Press
HELPING VICTIMS – **Mary Reina** RN, and the Director of the Sexual Assault Response Team, shows a sexual assault kit in the examination room at the Sexual Assault Response Treatment Center at the Antelope Valley Hospital in Lancaster.

Rodriguez said four volunteers each takes three shift a week on the phone lines, and she and a couple of other paid SARS staff fill in the gaps. Another eight volunteers handle the role of advocate, each taking one 12-hour shift a week to provide emotional support for the victims.

SARS advocates and SART staff function as a team, Reina and Rodriguez said.

When a call comes in from the emergency room notifying SARS staff that a victim came to the hospital, an advocate responds immediately.

"We meet them in the emergency room," Rodriguez said. "We work with law enforcement."

Reina said the advocates stay with the victim in the Emergency Room and escort the victim to the SART Center.

Then the advocate stays with the victim through the interview and exam process and also goes with the victim to court for the entire trial when a suspect is caught.

Rodriguez said she's seeking more volunteers. She "doesn't want to overwhelm" the current crew. "I want to keep them going." So she limits their hours because the cases they work on are difficult to hear.

"Some of the cases out here are so traumatic, especially when you have a child victim. It's just devastating to have to sit through an exam," Rodriguez said.

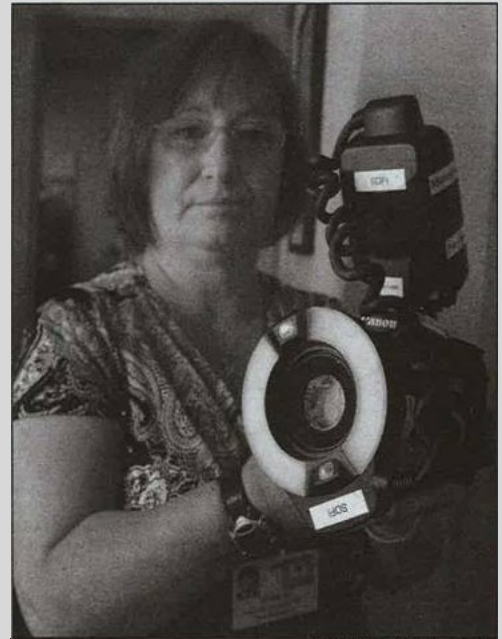
She scheduled an advocate training course to begin Friday, Sept. 14. The 40-hour course will take place from 6 to 9:30 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays. Participants who complete the course will be state-certified advocates, Rodriguez said. "They get a certificate stating they completed the 40-hour training.

"A lot of people think SARS is no longer here."

But Rodriguez said the program is still going and now has two therapists who perform Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, a type of psychotherapy.

"It has helped an estimated 2 million people of all ages, revealing many types of psychological distress," she said.

Although Reina said the center sees victims of all ages and both genders. The majority of cases involve adolescents and young adults from ages 14 to 24. Last year, they had an 88-year-old victim.



RON SIDDLE / Valley Press

FIGHTING FOR VICTIMS

Renee Withers, a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, stands with their SDFI-TeleMedicine Forensic Imaging System, a solution that was specially designed for forensic nursing. The SDFI-TeleMedicine system was donated by the Alpha Chart Guild to be used in the examination room at the Sexual Assault Treatment center in the Antelope Valley Hospital in Lancaster, California.

A closet, shown below, at the center holds donated blankets and toys to be given to the victims of assault.



"So we see a wide range," Reina noted. "We see males. We have prisoners that come from Kern County. We get prison rapes."

When suspects are caught within the 120-hour period, the forensic nurses also take biological evidence from them.

Information gathered from victims and suspects is shared with law enforcement, Reina said. In addition to taking swabs of bodily fluids for DNA, the nurses take forensic pictures of injuries.

The SDFI-TeleMedicine System is a \$22,000 forensic imaging solution provided by the Alpha Charter Guild, the nonprofit group that does fundraising to support the hospital, said Renee Withers, the center's clinical coordinator.

"It's a forensic camera system and a secure image management software solution that highlights injury. It was specifically made for forensic nursing cases," Reina said.

With their SDFI-TeleMedicine equipment, the center's staff can send secured/encrypted photos through a secure file portal directly to law enforcement officials. The imaging process and the software encryption used exceed both HIPAA and U.S. Military standards making SDFI-TeleMedicine, "Secure Beyond Reasonable Doubt".

After gathering all the necessary information, Reina said they provide victims with medication "to protect against STDs and pregnancy." The medication is given to victims 12 years and older.

"The serial rapist killed in Ohio - some of that DNA was collected here, at AV Hospital," Reina said.

She was referring to Abram Alexander Bynum, shot to death by Ohio police on July 7. His DNA linked him to Antelope Valley rapes and sexual assaults that occurred in 2004 and 2005.

Staff at the center strive for a cozy atmosphere to put victims at ease, as much as possible. There's a waiting room for family, a front desk where law enforcement sits to take information, an interview room to give victims privacy, an exam room and a kitchen stocked with snacks and drinks for the families and the victims.

Typically victims don't want to eat, but Reina said, "We want them to put something in their stomach because we're giving them pills."

Bears and blankets pack a closet, floor to ceiling, at the center.

Staff use the stuffed animals, plus assorted other toys and the blankets to comfort assault victims, according to Reina and Withers.

"We really like the blankets," Withers said, noting that victims usually come in "cold and shivering."

Reina said all those items have been donated to the center: hand-made quilts from people who attend the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Avenue K in west Lancaster, other blankets from Project Linus, stuffed bears from the Greater Antelope Valley Association of Realtors, stuffed moose from the Moose Lodge, toys and blankets from anonymous donors who drop their contributions off at the hospital's volunteer office, and the hospital's information technology group "always has a toy drive."

Children aren't the only ones to receive a cuddly bear or moose.

"We give every adult a stuffed animal," Reina said. "Everybody needs that to make it through this."

Clothing donations are also needed because the staff keeps the clothes victims wore during the attack as part of the case evidence. She said anyone wishing to donate an item can contact Colleen Simpson, vice president of the Antelope Valley Hospital Foundation, at: (661) 949-5810.

Reina said she has been giving presentations about sexual assault to students at medical schools, Antelope Valley College nursing students, high school classes and community organizations to educate the public and raise awareness.

Anyone interested in having a presentation on the subject can contact Mary Reina at: (661) 949-5572.

"With hundreds of sexual assaults reported each year in the Antelope Valley ... the center provides a calm, private and safe environment to perform the clinical exams required after an assault," said Edward Mirzabegian, Antelope Valley Hospital chief executive officer.

"The SART Center encompasses a team of specially trained nurses to address the medical forensic needs of victims of sexual assault," Mirzabegian said. "This center is available for victims 24-7 and works closely with law enforcement, the crime lab and the DA's office, as well as victim advocates."

Contact Mary Reina for more information about the program:

Mary Reina RN, MSN SANE - SART Center Director
Antelope Valley Hospital
1600 West Avenue J
Lancaster, CA 93534
Mary.Reina@AVhospital.org
Office: 661-949-5572
Cell: 661-547-2741