

# Holes in rape-kit program a barrier toward justice: survivors



Jacqueline Villeneuve-Ahmed, founder and director of the sexual assault advocacy group She Matters, said because parts of New Brunswick don't have equal access to the SANE program, some survivors may not get help or decide not to come forward.

By Payge Woodard

Aid for survivors of sexual assault in New Brunswick remains patchy, with some towns more than an hour out of reach of specialized services.

Since a 2018 Brunswick News investigation found there were pockets of the province without a sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) program, services have been brought to the Upper River Valley Hospital in Carleton County and a travel service is now offered for residents in Grand Manan.

The service is offered at 12 hospitals with a mobile program serving health zones 4, 5, and 7, meaning SANE teams travel to hospitals that operate 24/7. During a SANE examination, a specialized nurse collects forensic evidence, assesses injuries, screens for STDs and can offer medication to prevent pregnancy.

Patients living in an area that does not have a 24/7 hospital within the Horizon Health Network need to travel to another facility on their own or with police. A patient in Sussex, for instance, would need to travel an hour to reach services in Moncton, as would residents in St. Stephen to reach the Saint John Regional Hospital.

During that time, it's recommended they do not wash themselves, eat, drink or go to the bathroom to try to preserve evidence.

Department of Health spokesperson Bruce Macfarlane said the current level of SANE coverage is meeting the needs in New Brunswick.

"Forensic evidence and trauma informed care is specialized care that should be given by experts in the forensic field. Those trained as SANE must complete continuing education each month to maintain certification. Within Vitalité Health Network, sexual assault nurse examiners travel to hospital facilities to provide the services whereas within Horizon Health Network the victim must travel to the regional hospital that provides SANE services," he said.

Survivor Sarah Sherman, who underwent a SANE examination 17 years ago, said that kind of drive would be triggering for someone who has just gone through a traumatic experience.

"When a woman is sexually assaulted, she is in shock, confused, hyper alert, scared and is very sensitive to sensory issues, like movement, sounds, smells, and anything that may trigger to the experience she has had," said Sherman. "The last impulse is to want to go on a long drive, to a hospital or to a police station."

Sherman said not offering the services closer to home may deter survivors from coming forward.

"Having been assaulted, feeling terrified and alone, fearing they may return or find me on the drive, being unable to drive myself such a long way if no one was around, or having to go in a police car and feeling like a criminal. I think I would maybe reconsider, not get examined, not report. There would be so much time to reconsider that it would be easy to not get help," she said.

Provincial SANE co-ordinator Roxanne Paquette said with services now in all health zones, the province is providing "best care" but added the hour-drive for some is "not ideal."

In a 2020 report on SANE accessibility, *She Matters*, an advocacy group made up of sexual violence survivors, called New Brunswick's SANE program promising but limited. Jacqueline Villeneuve-Ahmed, founder and director of the organization said unequal access is creating barriers to justice.

She pointed to several issues, including people without access to transportation and those facing domestic violence who may not be able to travel an hour from home for the hours-long service without their partner's knowledge.

"You also have to think about the mental well-being of the individual immediately after a sexual assault has occurred, in many cases a survivor won't be able to transport themselves," she said. "Really what it comes down to is every survivor should fundamentally have the ability to report their case to law

enforcement and go through the justice process if they choose to do so, and based on geographical location at present, not every survivor has access to those kits."

Although RCMP can transport survivors, Villeneuve-Ahmed said getting in the back of a squad car wouldn't be easy. From a survivor's standpoint, you're filled with guilt, shame and don't want anyone to know what's happened, she said.

"Being put in the back of a police vehicle would just affirm those thoughts," she said, adding some people may have reservations being around law enforcement.

Villeneuve-Ahmed suggested the kits be available at every hospital.

"It's so hard for survivors to just make that decision to go into the hospital and to report and to choose to seek justice for themselves so when you present barriers it really can lead to survivors just shutting down and feeling they aren't worthy of reporting," she said.