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CLIENT: **Methodist Health System**

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CALLOUT COPY – FRONT COVER:

In 2009, *The Heidi Wilke SANE/SART Survivor Program* treated **more than 133 sexual assault survivors** in the Omaha area – the majority women under the age of twenty-five.

HEADLINE:

Specialized Care for Sexual Assault Victims The Heidi Wilke SANE/SART Survivor Program

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Sexual assault is a nationwide problem, and sadly, it is one that the Omaha community is not immune to. Whenever it occurs, sexual assault survivors need a place to turn where they can receive medical care and support provided by a team of professionals who truly understand what they are going through. In a time when they are feeling most vulnerable, survivors benefit from receiving immediate and ongoing care in an environment where they are treated with dignity and respect. This is exactly what Methodist Hospital's SANE/SART program was created to provide.

CALLOUT:

According to the *Nebraska Crime Commission*, there were **583 reported cases of forcible rape in the State of Nebraska in 2008, 187 occurring in the Omaha metro area**. "More than one-half of sexual assault cases occur within the context of a date," said Ellen Freeman-Wakefield, MPA, Chief Operating Officer of YWCA Omaha. "And of course there are many more sexual assault survivors who do not report the crime."

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Origins of the Program

On January 30, 2002, Heidi Wilke was kidnapped, robbed and raped after leaving a meeting near downtown Omaha. After going through this traumatic experience, Heidi and her husband Jeff sought ways to help other survivors.

Acting on a suggestion by the prosecutor on Heidi's case, the Wilkes began working on bringing a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) and Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) program to Omaha. At the time, the nearest program in Nebraska was at

BryanLGH Medical Center in Lincoln. After contacting area hospitals, Methodist, which already had a few SANE certified nurses on staff, agreed to begin implementing a program. It was a natural fit for a hospital committed to women's health care.

On June 2, 2003, *The Heidi Wilke SANE/SART Sexual Assault Survivor Program* officially opened its doors at Methodist Hospital. The program provides coordinated, comprehensive and compassionate care to survivors of sexual assault. In the first year after the center was opened, the number of women coming to Methodist for treatment of sexual assault doubled – demonstrating the need for a program of its kind in this community.

CALLOUT DEFINITIONS:

SANE stands for *Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner*. A SANE is a specially trained registered nurse who provides comprehensive care to victims of sexual assault. The role of a SANE includes taking a history from the victim for the purpose of diagnosis and treatment of health care concerns; conducting a complete physical assessment of the victim to determine whether trauma is present; performing a thorough genital exam; collecting and documenting any forensic evidence; providing appropriate information and referrals to the victim; working with the victim advocate and other team members to assure coordinated service; and providing courtroom testimony when needed.

SART stands for *Sexual Assault Response Team*, and it is a community based coordinated response to victims of sexual assault. The community team includes representatives from health care providers, advocacy programs, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors' offices as well as any other professionals that serve victims of sexual violence in the community. Ultimately, a SART should coordinate immediate and continuing medical, advocacy and criminal justice services to victims of sexual violence in order to promote the safety and dignity of victims.

CALLOUT LIST:

Sexual assault can happen to anyone—male or female, adolescent or adult and the SANE/SART unit exists to help provide treatment to survivors for:

- Identification and care of injuries
- Evidence collection
- Preventive treatment for some sexually transmitted diseases
- Emergency pregnancy prevention
- Emotional support
- Counseling and crisis care referral
- Health care follow-up, recommendations and referral

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A Collaborative Community Effort

The Heidi Wilke SANE/SART Sexual Assault Survivor Program is not an effort of Methodist Hospital alone; it is a combined effort that brings together various community organizations, including the Omaha Police Department, the YWCA, and the City/County Prosecutor's office, to provide the best outcome for rape survivors.

Lieutenant Kathy Gonzales with the Omaha Police Department's Special Victims Unit has been involved with Methodist's SANE/SART program for the past three years. According to Gonzales, the department refers the sexual assault victims it encounters to Methodist for treatment "because of their skill and training not only in treating the victim's medical needs, but also for the proper collection of evidence, which is so crucial to the investigation of a case."

"We rely on the expertise of the physicians, nurses and staff of Methodist's SANE/SART program," said Lt. Gonzales. "It has helped to increase conviction rates for sexual assault in our community and it's been a great collaborative approach to dealing with sexual assault."

Lt. Gonzalez acknowledges how the SANE/SART program has helped bring the various organizations together to form a close knit team. "With just a phone call or an e-mail, I know that I can get assistance on a sexual assault case," she said. "Information gathered by each individual agency is shared to help ensure that the victim receives all the services they need. And hopefully, we are able to get the information and evidence we need to make an arrest and see that justice is served."

County Attorney, Stephanie Shearer, who was working with the office when Heidi Wilke's case was prosecuted, expressed that the SANE/SART program has also greatly improved the consistency and the quality of the evidence that is collected in sexual assault cases, "The training they have received, not only on how to collect, but how to preserve the evidence is a great advantage for our office and for the police department," she said. "Collecting DNA and documenting related injuries are all effective aids in the prosecution. The better that that's done in the initial stage, in this case during the examination, the more likely we'll have a better outcome during the criminal prosecution."

"I don't really think that I could estimate the value that (the SANE/SART program) brings to victims," Shearer said. "I have dealt with numerous sexual assault survivors who have been treated at Methodist, and they have nothing but glowing things to say about the care they've received. The fact that they have a place of privacy before and during the medical exam and to meet with an advocate and law enforcement...the benefits that brings to the victim, to deal with such a traumatic experience is invaluable."

The SANE Nurse's Critical Role

The importance of SANE training is vital not only in treating a patient's medical and emotional needs, but also for preserving integrity of evidence.

"SANE nurses provide a huge resource to the community," said the program's supervisor, Jackie Thielen, MSN, APRN. "In addition to providing health care to survivors, their role is to collect forensic evidence, such as DNA, in order to help law enforcement

conduct its criminal investigation. And although they do not work for the defense or the prosecution, SANE nurses are often called to testify in sexual assault cases.”

Currently, Methodist Hospital has fourteen SANE certified nurses on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to assist survivors of sexual assault. And since the medical exams are lengthy, lasting anywhere from two to four hours in addition to the police interview, nurses who are called in to assist are there for the long haul.

“Survivors leave feeling a personal touch because nurses are committed to being there,” said Terry Perry, RN, and a SANE nurse who has long been involved with the program. “Our SANE nurses have a passion to be involved. These are moms with full-time jobs, who miss soccer games and holidays to be there for survivors. They’re not doing it for the money.”

To continue to ensure that the community need for SANE/SART trained staff is met, Nebraska Methodist College-Josie Harper Campus offered a five-day (40 hour) SANE/SART training in October 2009. This intensive, hands on training allows registered nurses to become certified SANE practitioners and was attended by 46 participants throughout Nebraska and Iowa.

Protecting the Privacy and Dignity of Survivors

Care, comfort and dignity are what survivors need most following a sexual assault. It is a traumatic experience for survivors who often just want to hide. Methodist’s SANE/SART team is committed to helping survivors know that they are not alone.

Sally Jochens, a CASDA volunteer and SANE nurse, explained the importance of having SANE certified nurses and staff in the Omaha community, “Survivors benefit from having a neutral person who will not only take them through the exam and collect evidence, but who will also address the serious emotional and health issues a sexual assault survivor faces.”

In addition, the privacy and emotional support offered by Methodist’s SANE/SART program is important to help victims from being retraumatized by having to wait for long periods in a crowded ER waiting room. Thanks to SANE/SART, the average Emergency Department wait time for sexual assault victims has been cut in half.

From the private waiting area, survivors are examined by a SANE certified nurse in a private exam room equipped with state-of-the-art equipment to help with evidence collection and documentation. The unit also features a private bathroom and shower for survivors to use after the exam, as well as clothing to wear home, provided by the Assistance League of Omaha.

Following the exam, the SANE/SART unit also offers a place for women to be interviewed by police officers and to meet with the YWCA victim advocate in private. The victim advocate helps guide survivors through the recovery process; including helping them find counseling and support groups, as well as guiding them through legal proceedings.

According to Thielen, receiving ongoing follow-up care after a sexual assault is critical to the recovery process. When they leave Methodist, survivors are given a suggested discharge plan for six months of follow up that they can bring with them when they visit their health care provider. A case manager also calls survivors within 24 to 48 hours to see if they have further questions and to provide referrals for follow up care.

For patients without a regular physician or unable to afford follow-up visits, Methodist can refer them to the Renaissance Health Clinic, which offers low-cost health care from certified nurse practitioners on a sliding-fee scale. **Thanks to SANE/SART, all survivors who come to the program for treatment now go on to receive follow-up care, compared to only 35 percent of sexual assault patients prior to its implementation.**

Education and Prevention

One of the important tasks of Methodist's SANE/SART program is to help increase community awareness about the reality of sexual assault in our community, as well as the resources available to assist victims.

“One of the benefits of having this program at Methodist is that its very presence helps bring awareness in the community about sexual assault – letting people know that it does happen here – and that when it does, the SANE/SART program is here to help,” Wilke said.

Each year, the SANE/SART team gives an average of twenty presentations on sexual assault to area high schools, colleges, business and community groups. Often, these are joint presentations given by members of the Methodist SANE/SART team, as well as representatives from the Omaha Police Department and the YWCA.

Thielen and Perry also collaborated with the YWCA in 2009 to conduct a training at the University of Nebraska-Omaha educating campus security on the subject of dating violence. The pair also offers training to YWCA hotline volunteers, providing information about the rape exam and SANE/SART services so that volunteers have a better understanding of what victims will go through during their exam. Thielen also serves on the public policy board of the YWCA, keeping a watch on legislative issues concerning sexual assault.

CALLOUT STATISTIC:

In 2008, the YWCA received 195 calls to their hotline regarding incidents of sexual assault. That number rose to 217 in 2009 – an 11 percent increase.

Meeting a Present and Future Community Need

Within the walls of Methodist's SANE/SART unit, survivors of all ages have access to care, regardless of their ability to pay. According to Thielen, 40% of patients treated through the Methodist SANE/SART program since 2007 had no health insurance to cover medical and preventative care related to sexual assault.

Furthermore, most insurances and Medicare often do not cover all of the expenses associated with treatment for sexual assault. And many survivors are not able to afford their out-of-pocket medical costs, especially when it comes to receiving the follow-up care that is critical to their recovery.

To ensure that compassionate care will always be available to sexual assault survivors, both Heidi and Jeff Wilke continue to work closely with the Methodist Hospital Foundation to spearhead fundraising efforts to endow the program permanently. This endowment will help to cover any shortfalls and provide charitable assistance to patients who are unable to cover out-of-pocket expenses.

“We feel that SANE/SART program plays a critical role in helping transform sexual assault victims into survivors,” said Cynthia Peacock, Director of the Methodist Hospital Foundation. “We just knew that it was important to support a program that provides that coordinated, comprehensive, and also fantastic care for every survivor of sexual assault, regardless of their age, race or gender.”

BACK COVER CONTENT:

Omaha’s SART team includes:

- Dr. Joseph T. McCaslin, Director of Methodist Hospital’s Emergency Department, is the medical director for the SANE/SART program.
- Dr. Robert Penn serves as the program’s Infectious Disease Specialist, to help address the health issues survivors face, including the diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.
- SANE nurses (on call 24/7) – registered nurses who have undergone special training and are certified in the examination and care of sexual assault victims, as well as in the collection and custody of evidence.
- YWCA advocates who help survivors navigate the legal system and locate services, resources, counseling and a safe place to stay. The Center Against Sexual & Domestic Abuse (CASDA) provides similar support to survivors in Sarpy County.
- Members of the Special Victims Unit of the Omaha Police Department
- Members of the City/County Prosecutors Office,
- Methodist Hospital physicians, nurses, pastoral care, infection control staff, laboratory personnel, patient education department and other health care professionals.

MANDATORIES:

Methodist Health System (logo)
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