

Nurses who deal with sexual assault cases are 'a special kind of person'

Middletown nurse featured in training video for sexual assault forensics

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POUGHKEEPSIE — Caring for and collecting evidence from survivors of sexual assault takes a special mix of compassion and technical expertise.

Enter Erin Ptak of Middletown, the forensic nurse examiner program coordinator for Family Services Inc. in Dutchess County, and one of the stars of the state's new training video for evidence collection in sexual assault cases. The video is introduced by "Law & Order: SVU" star Mariska Hargitay, who founded the Joyful Heart Foundation in 2004 to support survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence.

Dutchess, Ulster and Orange counties have Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner programs, with specially trained nurses such as Ptak.

"Because of the kind of expertise we bring to evidence collection, we don't go to court as much, because (suspects) plead out," Ptak said.

But in more rural areas, evidence-gathering falls to emergency room doctors and nurses. The video is geared toward them to explain not just how the evidence is collected but why — and what the crime lab does to process the evidence, and how prosecutors use it.



Registered nurse Erin Ptak of Middletown has been featured in a training video for forensic nurses in the state's Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program. She is pictured in the examination room at St. Francis Hospital in Poughkeepsie.

"It really should mean that every nurse and every doctor in emergency rooms across the state should have some level of familiarity with the kit, with evidence collection and with the consequences of not collecting it correctly," Ptak said. "Hopefully, we're going to raise the bar on evidence collection around the state."

Family Services' Dutchess County sexual assault program, sponsored by St. Francis Hospital and Vassar Brothers Medical Center, provides medical and evidence services, counseling and advocacy services each year for about 70 adult sexual assault victims, 50 child victims of sexual assault, and 45-50 cases of child physical abuse and some domestic violence cases. Recent grants

have secured a custom makeover for the exam room, making it cozy and soothing; a new infrared camera to document injuries, particularly bruising that's not immediately apparent; and other medical equipment. The hospitals donate supplies to the program, and the rooms.

Patients come to the program from all over the mid-Hudson, because St. Francis is the regional Level 2 trauma center, and Vassar is the only place in the immediate area with a specialized pediatric sexual assault nurse. Sullivan County has started bringing its child victims to the Vassar program, Ptak said.

The work is hard, for sure. Even the nurses got to the counselors after rough cases, Ptak said. "It takes a special kind of person to do this kind of work."