



Providence Medical Center Saint John Hospital

Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Health System

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For Immediate Release

Saint John Staff Lend Helping Hands And Hearts To Victims Of Abuse

The first patient Linda Seba, R.N., Saint John Hospital emergency room, cared for at the new Alliance Sexual Assault Center in Leavenworth, Kan. may turn out to be one of the most heartbreaking. Detectives brought in a young girl they suspected had been abused by her father for a year. Although Seba, the center's volunteer coordinator, couldn't find any outward evidence of abuse, she knows that doesn't prove the abuse didn't happen.

As a nurse in the Emergency Department, Seba has seen firsthand the devastating affect rape has on its victims. Over the past few years, an average of 35 rapes per year have been reported in Leavenworth County. But she knows that the actual number of rapes that occurred in this small Kansas community was far higher. Most sexual assault victims are too frightened or embarrassed to report the crime and get help.

"Statistics show that a higher number of victims report their rape if they can be examined outside of a traditional hospital setting," Seba says. "In a town our size, chances are that someone in the hospital will know who you are. People don't want to come to a hospital because it's too public and too embarrassing."

That is why Seba and Saint John teamed up with the Leavenworth Alliance Against Family Violence to create the Alliance Sexual Assault Center, which opened its doors in April 2003. For nearly five years, Seba and other volunteers laid the groundwork for the center. They received special medical training to more effectively

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treat rape victims, raised money to purchase medical equipment and generated enthusiasm and support within the community.

“It was really important to me to establish a program to take care of the emotional needs of rape victims,” Seba says. “We don’t want to give them a rape kit and send them on their way. We want to sit and talk with them for a long time, then call them in a week to follow up. We want them to know there is somebody out there who doesn’t think it’s their fault and to let them know who they can call if they have a problem.”

Myra Harwood, R.N. and Ruth Burke, R.N. Saint John emergency room nurses, are among the clinic’s volunteer nurses who are on-call 24 hours to see victims referred by medical professionals or law enforcement officials. The nurses provide a physical exam, first aid, and crisis counseling. They also collect DNA samples and determine whether the victims have been exposed to HIV, Hepatitis or other sexually transmitted diseases. Jim Wirkkula, D.O., a Saint John emergency room physician who serves as the center’s volunteer medical director, then reviews each case.

“I review the charts, help the nurses with the protocol and prescribe any medications that need to be dispensed,” he says. “I’m proud to be a part of the center and to give my time to ensure that victims of sexual abuse receive the very best medical care and follow-up help.”

While volunteers provide the center with their time and expertise, members of the Leavenworth community also donate nearly all of the supplies and equipment. For example, Saint John contributed exam tables, needles, syringes and first aid supplies. When volunteer nurses who work at Saint John perform blood tests, the hospital underwrites the lab fees.

“Saint John has been very supportive of our work,” Seba says. “When I described to them the need, they said, how can we help?”

Marta Ramsey, administrative director of Patient Care Services at Saint John, says supporting the hospital’s nurses in this endeavor is a natural extension of the hospital’s commitment to safeguard the community’s health. “If we can increase reporting of sexual abuse, and if we can help people come out of sexually abusive situations, that’s very important,” she says.

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Sister Catrina Bones, vice president of Mission Integration for Providence Health, agrees that supporting the work of the center is an ideal way for the hospital to care for those in need and to be faithful to the mission entrusted to its staff.

“One of our core values is respect,” she states. “When a person has been physically, sexually, emotionally or spiritually violated, it is essential that all who are providing care from Providence Health reaffirm the person’s sacred worth and dignity. It is a blessing when our employees, who are our greatest resources, are using the gifts they have been given to provide a healing ministry to those who have been injured and hurt in this manner,” Sister Bones adds.

One of the most vulnerable groups the center serves is children. To help kids feel more at ease in the clinic, they created a special pediatric exam room. Named “Brian’s Room” in honor of Brian Edgar, a Kansas City youth who lost his life at the hands of abusive parents, the exam room resembles a child’s playroom and is filled with toys children can use to act out their abuse, if they are too shy to talk.

“Until now, people had to take their children to hospitals in Kansas City to be examined, but many don’t have transportation or insurance, so they just didn’t receive treatment for their children,” Seba says. “Having the ability to have their children examined locally will make a big difference. People don’t feel intimidated at our center.”

Seba is very proud of the center. She is proud of the way the community members have banded together, contributing everything from interior decorating services to pharmaceuticals. She is proud that Leavenworth has a place where victims can receive crisis care in a private setting. She is also proud that the center will extend its care outside its own walls by providing rape prevention education at area schools.

“For a long time, sexual assault was pushed under the rug,” she says. “People didn’t deal with it well. We want to change that. We want to make that different.”