

Testimony of
Ms. Debra S. Holbrook

May 14, 2002

Good morning Chairman Biden and members of the Committee. Thank you for asking me to be here today. As a Registered Nurse and Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) in the Emergency Department at Nanticoke Memorial Hospital in Seaford, DE, I coordinate a team of forensic nurses who are specially trained to care for sexual assault and violence victims of all ages. We are on call at all times to collect DNA, trace and photographic evidence, assure advocacy and testify in court. Forensic nurses are the only specialty that have answered healthcare's call to care for victims of sexual assault. We provide a vital link in the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) between healthcare the law enforcement.

For years, nurses across the country have witnessed patients being re-victimized when they came to ERs, waiting for hours in crowded public waiting areas, telling their stories countless times, and being traumatized by judgmental practitioners without forensic training, ruining vital DNA. Shockingly enough, this is still the level of care that 8 out of 10 victims receive at any given time in the United States.

Senator Biden and DE House Representative Tina Fallon have been instrumental in helping our Program become the Model for Delaware and throughout the country, but we share many of the same problems as the rest of the nation. Kits may sit on shelves for years while perpetrators rape again and again. Running these kits and entering them in CODIS databanks would, undoubtedly, link perpetrators to many unsolved sex crimes. We are in need of Gas Chromatic Mass Spectrometer machines to be made available in every state to analyze specimens for victims of drug facilitated rape and equipment that stores images and communicates to other teams for second opinion. We need federal mandates that victims of all ages be taken to trained and regulated SANE teams with a team approach, and funding for salaries and education to keep these programs viable. Forensics in this country is mandated for dead victims, but not required for those we treat who are very much alive!

The International Association of Forensic Nursing serves as a clearinghouse and international resource for SANEs. IAFN sets standards of care and nursing practice, provides training and education, and through its Forensic Nurse Certification Board, tests and certifies practicing SANEs.

SANE teams across the country are in jeopardy of closing due to a lack of both funding and cooperation from law enforcement. Many prosecutors do not understand how crucial we are to pulling together cases that yield convictions. Melanie Withers, Deputy Attorney General in Georgetown, Delaware stated, " SANE programs are the best thing I've seen to benefit victims since I've been a prosecutor."

How do I tell the mother of a 3 year old that because she initially took her child to an ER that did not have a SANE team, it's too late to collect the evidence? Or a 20 year old given Ecstasy without her knowledge that we can't test for it in our state? How do we tell countless rape victims that their kits are useless because untrained personnel allowed wet swabs to mold, or that the kits were not even opened?

This legislation has the power to forever change the scenario for these victims. By mandating that the SART Team approach be utilized with SANEs providing the forensic healthcare, victims will never have to fear playing "hit or miss" with their judicial outcome. Increased numbers of perpetrators will be convicted, states will have standardization in equipment, funding and accountability, and properly collected DNA evidence will be analyzed, logged in CODIS and shared via national databanks.

On behalf of the millions who are raped annually, I thank you for your consideration of this legislation.