

NEWS

# SMU now offers sexual assault nurse examiners on call 24/7 for students

The Dallas university partners with nonprofit serving survivors



Program coordinator Amy Chennault poses at The Turning Point offices in Plano with pictures of fellow staff on the wall behind her. The Turning Point has partnered with SMU to provide 24/7 access to medical exams for students who have been sexually assaulted. (Liesbeth Powers / Staff Photographer)

A new hotline at Southern Methodist University gives students 24/7 access to services to assist victims of sexual assault.

The hotline is the result of a partnership between the university and The Turning Point, a Collin County nonprofit that provides counseling, education, and advocacy for those impacted by sexual violence.

Amy Chennault is a sexual assault nurse examiner, or SANE, and program coordinator at The Turning Point. She knows the importance of her role as a responder.

“We’re one of the first people the survivor comes in contact with on one of the hardest days of their life,” Chennault said. “I want to make the exam go as smoothly as possible.”

The new program offers free 24/7 sexual assault medical exams and services through the campus health center.

It comes at a time when SMU police made two separate arrests on campus in recent days for alleged sexual assaults on female students. Chennault said that The Turning Point’s hotline has been used twice in the last few weeks.



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SMU alumna Courtney Underwood, who has spent years helping to establish SANE programs at Dallas hospitals, spearheaded the partnership with the university that

allows students to receive The Turning Point's services with one phone call and a trip to the health center.

"Sexual violence is something that impacts students at SMU more than anyone wants to acknowledge or accept," Underwood said. "Having a crisis hotline and SANEs available to students 24/7 is going to transform the lives of all SMU students impacted by sexual violence."

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The Turning Point offers victims aftercare resources including paperwork, medications, and advocacy support. SANE-trained nurses bring their own equipment when called to a case, but also utilize on-site resources.

"The room at the SMU Health Center is wonderful," Chennault said. "One of our nurses only works in Collin County, and she was like, 'I would love to go to SMU.' She was very impressed with it: it's quiet, you have everything that we need, and everybody has been very accommodating."

SMU President R. Gerald Turner highlighted SANE access in the annual letter to the SMU Community addressing sexual harassment policy and resources. Avoiding long emergency room wait times is a key appeal of having on-campus SANE access, Chennault said.

“Survivors can be in the ER hours after our exam depending on what’s going on with other patients in the hospital,” she said. “We’ve had people who say, ‘I’m done, I’m not doing this’ because of wait times.”

The Turning Point also partners with the University of Dallas at Texas, but Underwood said that very few campuses have 24/7 SANE services.

Underwood, a rape survivor, is president of The Turning Point’s board of directors, and the namesake of the non-profit’s in-house clinic called Courtney’s Safe Place, She has been fighting for SANE services on campus since she was an SMU student.

“I can’t express what this partnership between The Turning Point’s Courtney’s Safe Place SANEs and SMU means to me,” Underwood said. “I am now a very proud alumni seeing something that I dreamed of for SMU but had been told would never be possible.”

She helped create and establish Dallas’ first rape crisis center and the county’s first SANE Program.

“It’s meaningful to my core and healing to me as a survivor,” Underwood said. “We also have an absolutely amazing team of SANEs who inspire me and leave me in absolute awe.”

Most nurses who have registered SANE training take on the job as a second job. SANE training includes 80 hours of in-class sessions, courtroom time, and shadowing established forensic nurses. Chennault began SANE work almost five years ago.

“There are not very many SANE nurses out there – that is one of the struggles we come across,” Chennault said. “A lot of people who say they do want to do this end up quitting because they don’t realize the mental trauma that comes with it for themselves. That’s why I try to check in with the nurses at least once a month and make sure that everything is going OK.”

It isn’t uncommon for many nurses to leave SANE work after about two years. Chennault ensured that her nurses received counseling within The Turning Point to

address the trauma that comes with the job. Her team of nurses is trained to provide SANE services in hospitals and clinics throughout North Texas.

“Having access to a sexual assault nurse examiner on campus is a great step forward in helping students feel safe and supported on campus,” said Natalie Clark, president of the Feminist Equality Movement, a group dedicated to furthering gender equality at SMU. “This service will provide much-needed care for students who are put in a horrible situation.”

Underwood credited SMU students, the police chief, and Dr. Randy Jones at the SMU Health Center for pushing for this partnership to become a reality.

“After being raped by my pastor at 15 years old in Dallas, I looked for help and found none; we all strive to ensure no other survivor ever faces that reality,” Underwood said. “Now students at SMU will have immediate and safe access to the services they need most during a time of crisis.”



**Simone Melvin**, SMU fellow. Simone Melvin is a senior at Southern Methodist University and is covering local news at The Dallas Morning News as a fellow. She is studying Creative Writing, Philosophy, and Journalism. She also serves as the digital editor and podcast producer for the student-run publication, SMU Daily Campus.

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