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Rape Kits May Stop In D.C. If Government Shutdown Continues

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WASHINGTON -- It's standard procedure for rape victims in the District of Columbia to receive a forensic exam when they arrive at the hospital so that DNA evidence can be quickly collected to help obtain justice for the victims. They can also expect to receive the services of an advocate who will be at their side through the entire process, helping them with any administrative, employment or housing issues that may arise.

All of that may stop if the government shutdown drags on -- no more rape kits for victims, no more advocates.

"The real concern is that crime victims would be going without services that they critically need," said Nikki Charles, co-executive director of the Network for Victim Recovery of DC.

Charles' group is called in whenever a victim of sexual assault comes to a D.C. hospital for a forensic exam. Her case managers, who help the victims with anything they need, are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

NVRDC is one of two groups that makes up D.C.'s Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner Program. The other group is D.C. Forensic Nurse Examiners, which is responsible for administering all adult rape kits and many adolescent ones. Both groups rely on federal and local funds.

"If we don't have funds, no rape kits get done, there's no medical forensic exam," said Heather Devore, executive director of D.C. Forensic Nurse Examiners. "It would be back to the days of prior to SANE's existence, where it's essentially an evaluation by a physician and you lose evidence."

"It's especially important because we know that DNA degrades quickly; we only have a short time in order to obtain this evidence," she added. "It's not like we can schedule and tell them to come back in a month when we have funding, because all that evidence is gone at that point."

Charles agreed, saying that "anything that happens between the time that we had to suspend services and got back up and running -- the potential for those to receive justice in the criminal justice system would basically evaporate. There would be no chance."

Thanks to assistance from the D.C. government this week, SANE now has money from a contingency fund that will last through the end of the month. Melissa Hook, director of the D.C. Office of Victims Services, said she made the case to the city administrator that the rape kits and rape examinations should be deemed essential.

"Forensic nurses can be paid to conduct the exams," she wrote in an email to The Huffington Post. "There are plenty of rape kits."

But Hook cautioned that the funds will eventually dry up unless the shutdown ends. "We will have to figure out what we are going to do about payment when the Contingency Fund runs out," she said.

The D.C. government and its programs are affected by the shutdown because the city's budget is appropriated by Congress.

Devore said she has no idea how they will keep operating if the government stays closed. She is looking into ways to obtain private funds.

"That's what I would have to go to. The government funds are gone," she said. "The other alternative is asking my nurses to be on call in the middle of the night and coming in and performing their duties without pay, and without anticipation of being paid anytime in the

future."

And unlike federal employees who will likely receive back pay once the government reopens, nonprofits will get no such reprieve.

Charles estimated that for the forensic examiners' salaries and supplies, she needs about \$30,000 a month.

The shutdown has already jeopardized protections and supports for victims of domestic violence. The Huffington Post recently [reported](#) on the plight of DC SAFE, a nonprofit that provides emergency services to battered women and had \$250,000 in grants put on hold.

Natalia Otero, DC SAFE's executive director, said it needs \$19,000 to keep operating its shelter and hotline services for the next two weeks. So far, the nonprofit has managed to raise \$14,000. She is optimistic: "We know that we are going to be able to make it for the month."

Karma Cottman, executive director for the DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said she knows of other nonprofits that could face hard choices if the shutdown lingers. "Some agencies are looking to furlough staff," she said. Others think they can hold out until mid-October before making cuts.

"We are at a crucial point," Cottman warned. "We are talking about organizations who have already been affected by sequestration and other budget cuts."