



COMMITTEE ON
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Pallone Remarks at Hearing on Availability of SAFE Kits at Hospitals

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing on “Examining the Availability of SAFE Kits at Hospitals in the United States:”*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Sexual assault is a horrific crime, and we must continue to work to end the cycle of violence.

Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners, otherwise known as SAFEs, play an important role in helping those who are victims of these crimes. SAFEs provide care to victims of sexual assault, and – with the use of a forensic exam kit – can collect a wide variety of DNA evidence that can be used to prosecute an offender.

Thanks to the Violence Against Women Act states must provide sexual assault kits free of charge to anyone who needs it. The law also authorizes three Department of Justice grant programs that fund and train sexual assault forensic examiners.

Despite the strides we have made in the last 20 years, it can still be quite difficult for a victim to find a trained examiner when they need one. For example, according to media reports, only one hospital here in the D.C. area has a program with sexual assault nurse examiners on staff.

Unfortunately, his problem is occurring nation-wide. For example, according to a 2016 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), officials in the six states they studied said there were not enough examiners in their states to meet the demand for exams, particularly in rural areas. In some states, entire counties did not have any SAFE programs available.

In some cases, victims must travel over an hour to a facility with a trained examiner. In that time, a victim must avoid bathing, showering, using the restroom, or changing clothes, or else risk damaging the evidence before it can be collected. This is unacceptable, and we must find ways to make these services more widely available.

The GAO report also found that there was no national database that captures the number of examiners, where they are, and what their capabilities are. The only data available is limited in scope and collected on a voluntary basis.

This means that victims do not have up-to-date information and cannot easily identify all health care settings where sexual assault forensic exams might be conducted. This kind of information should be easily accessible to victims in their most vulnerable moments.

Moreover, even when a facility provides these kits and related SAFE services, states and hospitals have struggled to retain enough examiners. State officials reported to GAO that they face challenges such as limited availability of classroom and clinical training, weak support for programs from stakeholders, and the emotional and physical demands on examiners.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate the challenges we still face in ensuring that all victims of sexual assault can get access to a forensic exam kit and services provided by a trained examiner, should they request it.

That is not to say that there are no success stories. Clearly, there are many hospitals and other facilities that provide sexual assault kits and SAFE services for those who need it. We should learn from those cases and determine what we can replicate on a broader scale.

I look forward to hearing from each of our witnesses here today about what we can do to get our arms around this problem, and what we can do to expand and retain our workforce of trained sexual assault forensic examiners.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the importance of the Violence Against Women Act. This act is a critical part of the federal government's response to sexual assault. It funds many of the programs we will be talking about today but the law is set to expire in just over a week. We must ensure this act is reauthorized so that these critical programs continue to receive funding, and victims can receive the care and services they need.

I thank our panelists for sharing their expertise on this important issue.

Thank you, I yield back.

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