



DATE: June 10, 2021

TO: Honorable Members of the Board of Supervisors  
Jeffrey V. Smith, M.D., J.D., County Executive

FROM: Paul E. Lorenz, Chief Executive Officer, SCVMC/Enterprise

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SUBJECT: Off Agenda Report on the Expansion of SAFE Services for Non-Fatal Strangulation

At the May 19, 2021 Health and Hospital Committee, Supervisor Simitian, as part of Agenda Item 11c, directed Administration to provide an off-agenda report that would specify the needs of the sexual assault forensic exam (SAFE) program, in order to expand medical forensic services to include strangulation, and the anticipated timing for implementation.

### **Background**

Survivors who have experienced non-fatal strangulation (NFS) are at risk for injuries that may be acute or delayed in their appearance, with a high index for lethality or long-term health consequences, even if there are no visible injuries. NFS in the setting of intimate partner violence (IPV) places survivors at additional risk of future homicide by their partner or abuser. Emergency Departments are often the initial access point of care for survivors of NFS but not all first responders or Emergency Department providers have the specialized training to correctly identify and treat NFS-related injuries.

In Santa Clara County, the SCVMC SAFE nurse examiners have extensive training in NFS cases, since approximately 17% of sexual assault survivors who seek SAFE exams are also strangled by their assailant. Similar to sexual assault, SAFE nurse examiners are the most appropriate providers to assess and care for survivors of strangulation; however, the use of the SAFE exam for NFS cases has only recently been considered as a possible treatment option. To explore whether SAFE exams would be useful for the medical care and legal investigations for strangulation, without sexual assault, a pilot study was implemented in Santa Clara County on January 1, 2020. Because this pilot began during efforts to expand the SAFE

Program response locations, resources were limited for a full-scale pilot. The NFS in IPV SAFE pilot was therefore conducted at the main response location at SCVMC ED. This allowed the SAFE team and Adult/Adolescent Medical Director to focus education and training for the ED staff at only one hospital, while they simultaneously worked to open the SAFE response locations in the north county and Santa Cruz County. In May 2021, feedback on the NFS in IPV SAFE Pilot demonstrated the success of SAFE exams in NFS, prompting the directive by the Board of Supervisors to implement the NFS SAFE exams at all SAFE response locations, and to ensure services are also available for pediatric survivors.

### **Expansion of SAFE services to include strangulation in IPV**

The Adult/Adolescent SAFE Program has successfully expanded services in the last year to include additional SAFE response locations, including Stanford Health Care (SHC), Santa Cruz County, and the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), in addition to a new south county response site at St. Louise Regional Hospital (SLRH), which is anticipated to open in August 2021. The south county site at SLRH has been delayed due to challenges brought on by the COVID pandemic in retaining staff and training of new on-call examiners. The Program has also added NFS SAFE exams at SCVMC.

All Adult/Adolescent SAFE examiners are currently trained to assess for injury and trauma in strangulation survivors to help guide medical treatment, evidence collection, provide follow up, or testify in legal proceedings, as appropriate.

Staffing to support the expansion of SAFE services, including expansion of NFS SAFE examinations in IPV, to all response locations, is included in the County Executive's recommended Budget for FY2021-22. The request adds 6 Clinical Nurse III positions representing 4.2 FTEs. These additional positions will support the coverage and stability needed for that expansion. These examiners will collect evidence of physical trauma in victims both to help guide medical treatment and improve prosecution and conviction of perpetrators in these cases.

### **Education for Healthcare Providers and Service Line Leadership**

A critical aspect of implementing NFS exams is the education of medical providers on recognizing and understanding the injuries associated with strangulation assaults. Implementing the IPV healthcare standards as guidance for healthcare providers in Santa Clara County will help increase their understanding of strangulation injuries and clinically relevant information to enhance screening, treatment, and support of survivors after strangulation. This is particularly important for ED healthcare providers, who are expert in managing trauma and emergent airway problems, but do not always have the same training or

understanding of the complexities with strangulation care and follow up needs. It is also of critical importance for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers and first responders to have this training, since they often respond to medical calls related to intimate partner violence and are uniquely situated to assess for injury in the immediate aftermath of a strangulation event. Curriculum for this education needs to be developed and training will need to be provided by the Adult/Adolescent SAFE Medical Director.

The proposed Service Line Leadership request that is also included in the County Executive's recommended Budget for FY2021-22, will support program planning, educational program, standards, and policy development, and provide operational leadership for medical forensic services for all ages throughout the county, as well as the Child and Adolescent Center of Excellence associated clinical programs, supporting the CAC Medical Clinic and SPARK Clinic.

This proposal will also provide structure for initial and ongoing training and support for front line medical staff at SAFE response locations, including guidance on screening and best practice care before and after the SAFE examiner arrives. This will also support 24/7/365 access to SAFE training or advice, whether in the hospital, clinic, or community partner settings.

Because of the training required of medical providers and first responders to fully implement NFS in IPV services at all SAFE response locations it is anticipated that NFS in IPV SAFE exams will be available at all SAFE response locations by the end of calendar year 2021.

The proposed Service Line Leadership model will also support training of the Pediatric Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE) staff in NFS exams to allow expansion of these services to the pediatric population within the county. This infrastructure also allows alignment of the Pediatric and Adolescent/Adult SAFE programs into one service line, removing redundant workflows, allowing consolidation of best practices and resources, and facilitating program expansion efforts.

The service line model will also position the SAFE Program to respond to the needs for services in drug-facilitated assaults, child physical abuse, intimate partner violence, and human trafficking at all SAFE locations, as well as support suspect forensic exams, and assist with educational needs for health care providers, regarding best practice care for survivors in emergency and primary care settings.

### **Healthcare Standards for Intimate Partner Violence and Strangulation**

In conjunction with the Adult/Adolescent SAFE Medical Director, healthcare standards are being developed at SCVMC for use enterprise wide. These standards will also be shared with the Medical Committee of the Santa Clara County Domestic Violence Council and other stakeholders for review, input, and consideration for use by healthcare personnel across the county, at both SAFE and non-SAFE response locations.

The goal is to ensure healthcare providers have access to consensus developed evidence-based and trauma-informed tools and resources to serve survivors of IPV and strangulation. Utilization of these healthcare standards will improve recognition for the risks of serious injury and provide critical information for referring survivors to a SAFE examiner for care.