

## Norah Lusk: Crossing Barriers While Respecting Boundaries



The vast expanse of rural Nevada makes access to critical, specialized healthcare services especially difficult for victim-survivors faced with the already harrowing task of seeking help. The Nevada Institute of Forensic Nursing (NVIFN) was created to combat this challenge and offer a safe, accessible space for victim-survivors to seek care.

Co-founded by Norah Lusk, an unwavering advocate for victim-survivors and recipient of this year's Visionary Voice Award, and Cynthia Milligan-Lusk, NVIFN is a beacon of hope for victim-survivors in rural Nevada- pioneering a compassionate, trauma-informed, and victim-centered model for Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) services on wheels. NVIFN offers mobile SANE units to victim-survivors, offering Sexual Assault Forensic Exams (SAFE) in a secure, discreet, and supportive environment.

Norah Lusk's heart was set on forensic nursing from the start, but her real-world experiences in emergency rooms laid the foundation for establishing NVIFN.

"Victims would come into the ER. Oftentimes the perpetrator would be either hauled in by the police or if there was an altercation, they would check in. So we'd have the survivor and we'd have the alleged perpetrator right down the hall. It wasn't just a volatile situation for the victim, but also for the staff," Lusk recalls, highlighting the experiences that motivated her to action. "We would have an advocate, but we'd also be trying to get a hold of a nurse. In the meantime, law enforcement may be called to another case. It was convoluted, and at the center of this, we have a survivor who doesn't really want to do any of it because this is a traumatic part of their life and we can't even get our act together to figure out how we will coordinate this. So I thought, okay, this makes no sense to me. We need a coordinated response outside of a multidisciplinary team. If it's a one-call, it should also be a one-stop. So that's how the Nevada Institute of Forensic Nursing came about."

### Importance of Mobile SANE Services

The innovation of mobile SANE services by NVIFN is a game-changer for rural Nevada, bridging the gap for SAFE exams for victim-survivors. In small communities, where it seems like everybody knows everyone, privacy and dignity can go a long way for victim-survivors.

"There's no signage on the mobile unit, so nobody knows what it is. We want to protect the anonymity of our patients because we very much believe in our motto: 'Victim to Survivor', and we don't want to put them in any other danger," Lusk states.

This mobile unit meets survivors where they are, both figuratively and literally, reducing the likelihood of re-traumatization associated with traveling long distances for a forensic exam.

"It's very easy to talk yourself out of traveling two or three hours to get an exam on one of the most humiliating things that's ever happened to you," Lusk describes how extensive, inconvenient travel times prevent many victim-survivors from seeking care. "Who is going to watch the kids? Who will pick them up from school? We are hoping to bridge that gap."

### **A SAFE Process**

Describing the SAFE exam, Lusk paints a picture of a trauma-informed, step-by-step process grounded in consent and comfort.

"We tell the survivor: at any point if you want to stop, you just let us know. We are here to make sure you're healthy and normal," Lusk and her team assure victim-survivors. The careful explanation of each step, the constant check-ins for consent, and the reassurance that victim-survivors can control the process are pivotal in restoring power to those who have been stripped of it.

Lusk's team is extremely thorough in making sure the process is as seamless as possible for the patient, by taking the time to gather and coordinate necessary materials before the victim-survivor enters the examination area.

"We get all of that out of the way, because once we go into the exam, that headspace is so different that no matter how hard you try and how trauma-informed you are, sometimes those exams make or break the next minutes of becoming a survivor."



*NVIFN Co-Founders Norah Lusk  
and Cynthia Milligan-Lusk*

### **What Lies Ahead**

Lusk foresees a bright future for NVIFN, with plans for a statewide model offering training to law enforcement, healthcare providers, and advocates to ensure a unified, trauma-informed response to sexual violence in Nevada. The primary obstacle at the moment is funding. NVIFN has been operating as a non-profit for about a year and a half now and has just recently started to receive funding.

"I don't know when it will happen," Lusk reflects on the next big steps for NVIFN. "It might be two years, it might be five, but we'll get there."

Lusk is also dedicated to reaching underserved communities. Through collaboration with NCEDSV, her team has been able to connect with advocates and stakeholders across Nevada, such as the Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada, building trust and understanding within marginalized populations, particularly in tribal communities.

## More Than A Service

In a field that often risks being overtaken by bureaucratic and clinical detachment, Lusk's philosophy is refreshingly human.

"The point is to be as real as possible because what has happened to them is the most real thing, and they almost don't believe it themselves," she says earnestly. Their work is more than a service; it's a lifeline to those in their darkest moments. The persistence to show up for the community every single time is reflected in NVIFN's philosophy which sees survivors as individuals on a healing journey. "Our victim advocate will continue to walk with them. However far we've got to go."

Naomi Thompson

*Communications Coordinator, NCEDSV*

