



LOUISIANA LEGISLATURE

March 24, 2024

Dear President Cooper and St. Tammany Parish Council:

Last month, the St. Tammany Legislative Delegation expressed our serious concern regarding the report that incoming coroner, Dr. Christopher Tape, had multi-state sexual harassment allegations that were unknown to voters prior to his election. Given the connection between his office and its role in investigating those crimes, we called for him to step aside and not assume office. Not only did he not step aside, we have now learned that he has unilaterally decided to terminate the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program, and its employees, when he assumes the office at midnight on Sunday, March 24.

His office is legally responsible for collecting evidence in sexual assault cases. It is imperative the exams be performed by trained professionals, and the SANE nurses are highly skilled at the process necessary to ensure effective prosecution of perpetrators.

Furthermore, it is our understanding that this program for the Florida Parishes is one of the best in the state, and possibly the nation. Given those considerations, Dr. Tape's unilateral action shows a clear disregard for justice and confirms that he is unfit for office.

Louisiana statute states the following:

State law, R.S. 13:5713 - The coroner or his designee shall examine all alleged victims of a sexually oriented criminal offense. The coroner may select the hospital or healthcare provider named as the lead entity for sexual assault examinations in the regional plan required by R.S. 40:1300.41 as his designee to perform the forensic medical examination.

The Coroner's office is the responsible party for handling sexual assault evidence. Only one hospital in the parishes under the St. Tammany Parish Coroner has been asked to be a designee. The current process of sending a SANE nurse from the Coroner's Office to a hospital to handle the victim's needs works best and is what is expected from an entity that is established to serve the public.

The Regional Plan submitted to the Louisiana Department of Health and recently approved by the Secretary verifies the following statement from the St. Tammany Coroner's Office:

The St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (STPCO SANE) Program Team will continue to serve as the official OPH Southeast Region 9's regional sexual assault response team and perform the forensic medical exams (FMEs) at the designated facilities, as designated by the coroners of St. Tammany, St. Helena, Tangipahoa, Livingston, and Washington Parishes.

That statement holds the Coroner's Office responsible to provide those services.

The St. Tammany Parish SANE Program currently provides services for the Louisiana Department of Health, Region 9, including Livingston, St. Helena, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, and Washington Parishes. Cutting the SANE program in St. Tammany will leave thousands of survivors without access to highly-trained forensic examiners. The decision to cut the SANE program is a grave disservice to survivors of sexual assault in those parishes.

It sends the chilling message that their experiences are not valid, nor is their pursuit of justice and healing a priority, further perpetuating a culture of silence and impunity surrounding sexual violence.

We cannot allow this to happen. We fully intend to pursue all options in the legislature to stop this effort and push Dr. Tape to resign. We encourage you to use all options at your disposal to do the same.

Sincerely,

Senator Beth Mizell (R-District 12, Franklinton)
Senator Patrick McMath (-District 11, Covington)
Senator Bob Owen (R-District 1, Slidell)
Senator Bill Wheat (R-District 37, Ponchatoula)
Representative Stephanie Berault (R-District 76, Slidell)
Representative Kim Carver (R-District 89, Mandeville)
Representative Peter Egan (R-District 74, Covington)
Representative Jay Galle (R-District 104, Mandeville)
Representative Brian Glorioso (R-District 90, Slidell)
Representative Mark Wright (R-District 77, Covington)