

Prison nurse loves job

By MATHEUS HONORATO, Press-Republican | Posted: Thursday, December 18, 2014
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PLATTSBURGH — The life of a nurse in the state correctional system is not easy, but against all odds, it is a very safe one, Amy Tousignant says.

At a recent presentation at SUNY Plattsburgh, dozens of students gathered in Hawkins Hall to listen to what the deputy superintendent of health care at Mohawk Correctional Facility in Rome had to say about her profession.

FEELS SAFE

Tousignant began her career as a registered nurse in the Intensive Care Unit at CVPH Medical Center in Plattsburgh.

Then, she said — to the amazement of some students — she was paid just \$8 an hour.

New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, she said, "offered me \$12 an hour. No-brainer at the time. I said, 'Well, I'll go for a year, then I'll get out.'

"Now, I'm in year 29, and I love it."

For Tousignant, safety is not an issue on the job.

"I feel safer working in the prison than I did in the ER," she said. "I know who's coming in, I know what they are not carrying, as opposed with the ER, where God knows who's packing and what they are carrying."

The nurse said that inmates are mostly very respectful to the medical staff taking care of them. Especially to women.

While not trying to stereotype, she explained, she believes the Hispanic culture exerts a certain influence on how protective some inmates are to the nurses.



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Amy Tousignant

She said most Hispanic men put their mothers on a pedestal and give them paramount respect, which translates to the women they meet while incarcerated.

CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT

All the same, nursing isn't quite the same on the inside.

And every room in the medical unit has two doors, one of which opens only from the outside, Tousignant said. That's a precaution in the event an inmate tries to barricade himself inside.

Tousignant told of inmates in the medical unit who covered themselves in feces in order not to be touched.

Others have tried to starve themselves to death, she said, and require medical intervention.

And policies are in place that are intended to prevent inmates from misusing certain items, such as inhalers, which have been opened up so parts could be used to unlock handcuffs.

Providing health care to inmates is a dictate of the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Tousignant said.

It reads: "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted."

CONTRABAND

The biggest problem in the prison system, Tousignant said, is drugs, especially the synthetic kind, which can't be revealed by testing.

Therefore, she said, correction officers and staff have a harder time finding out who is using them — and who is distributing them.

Among the most popular is K2, a synthetic form of marijuana, which some say can turn people into "zombies," she said.

Tousignant passed out a flier explaining what the substance is and how it affects users.

She told stories of many creative ways contraband substances make their way into the prison, including use of body cavities and even hiding them in the spirals of books.

In some instances, visitors have asked to use the bathroom then find a place inside where they think neither officers nor cleaning staff will look and drop the package there.

Later on, an inmate picks it up.

Student Suzanne Kinter, who arranged Tousignant's presentation, is involved with correctional nursing at the county level, where many inmates come in with drug addictions, including methamphetamine.

"We deal a lot with people who haven't been (sentenced) yet," she said. "So they come in, and we are detoxing them."

SECURITY

"Correctional nursing is secondary to security in the (prisons)," Tousignant said.

She told the students how there is protocol to be followed, even in life-or-death situations.

Imagine an inmate is found trying to hang himself, she offered as one example.

The medical staff can be ready to attempt to save his life. However, no one can enter the cell or attempt to help the inmate before the security team makes a sweep of area and gives them the OK.

Keeping inmates alive is a high priority at Mohawk Correctional, so guards and medical staff are always vigilant for suicide attempts.

"They do not have the right to kill themselves," Tousignant said.

MUTUAL RESPECT

As for the correction officers, she said, their relationship with the medical staff is very good.

"They need us, and we need them. There is a very mutual respect," she said.

Officers are injured, at times, on the job, Tousignant said, and "they have a lot of faith in us."