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This is the final training bulletin in our series exploring alternative reporting methods. In this last installment, we conclude by providing additional recommendations for best practices when implementing such options in your community.

3. Follow Up with Victims Who Provide Consent for This

Once a report of a sexual assault is recorded in writing and assigned a number for agency tracking, law enforcement professionals must then follow up with the victim to verify the information and offer appropriate services. The importance of this type of victim follow-up simply cannot be overstated. In fact, **all victims deserve follow-up contact from the police department when a sexual assault crime is reported**, except for victims who choose to report anonymously or otherwise specifically request that they not be contacted by law enforcement.

- In some cases, the only investigative action required may be to call the victim and offer the services of the agency. At the very least, such contact communicates support for the victim and conveys the message that the incident has been taken seriously by the agency.
- This follow-up contact may be especially critical in cases where investigators initially believe that the victim is uncooperative. With time to process the assault, many victims find themselves in a better position to consider their options for responding at a later time – including participating with a police investigation.

During this follow-up contact, officers and investigators have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the information recorded in the written report and to provide additional resources and referrals for the victim. It is therefore important that the person providing this follow-up has specialized training in sexual assault investigation and the dynamics of sexual assault.

In fact, such follow-up contact sometimes results in renewed investigative effort when victims decide that they are now able to provide more information or participate in the police investigation. Given the serial nature of most sexual assault offenders, reports are often linked to crimes that have already been committed or crimes that may be committed in the future.

4. Conduct Secondary Review on All Reports

We recommend that **the results of all sexual assault investigations be submitted for some kind of secondary review, whether it is provided by a supervisor, co-worker, or other colleague with specialized training in sexual assault investigation**. This is recommended even for incidents where the elements of a sexual assault offense do not appear to be met or the victim appears to be unable or unwilling to participate in the



investigation. This is the only way for the agency to ensure that all sexual assault reports are recorded, investigated, and coded properly.

Implementing this recommendation requires law enforcement agencies to establish protocols for accomplishing this objective – and incorporating an assessment of successful performance in regular job evaluations.

- In large agencies, an investigative sergeant will most likely review all written reports and then (regardless of the findings of the responding officer's preliminary investigation), the report will be assigned to a detective in the Sex Crimes Unit or to another investigator with specialized training in sexual assault investigation for additional follow-up.
- When completed, the case file is then submitted for secondary review by a supervisor in the Sex Crimes Unit or general Investigative Division if a specialized unit does not exist.

In small and/or rural agencies, the procedure may look different but the need for secondary review remains. For example, we recognize that many small agencies do not have detectives or other specialized investigators. Thus, responding officers handle the entire investigation of any sexual assault call they receive. This highlights the need to provide all officers with training in sexual assault investigation beyond the basic academy.

Yet it still remains critical for sexual assault cases to be submitted for some kind of secondary review, whether conducted by a supervisor, co-worker, or other colleague with specialized training in this area.

- Law enforcement professionals in small and/or rural agencies may need to develop a recognized team of experts within their area – whether from the surrounding county or larger geographic region. With email, teleconferencing, remote video, and other technology, there is simply no reason why officers in even the most rural areas cannot consult with others who have the expertise needed to determine the best course of action during a sexual assault investigation.
- In fact, this may be particularly important in rural or remote areas given the relative infrequency of sexual assault reports received by local law enforcement agencies. When officers do not respond to such cases very often, it can be difficult to feel confident in the mastery of these complex and difficult investigations.

Beyond conducting secondary reviews in individual cases, we also recommend implementing a procedure for evaluating cases on a more systemic level. This can be accomplished by establishing a multidisciplinary review committee, to ensure that established guidelines have been followed when it comes to reporting methods, investigative practices, and clearance decisions.

Multidisciplinary review can be particularly important in cases that have been unfounded by a law enforcement agency, as well as those that are unlikely to be successfully prosecuted. Such a review committee should include other members in the coordinated community

response to sexual assault, such as victim advocates, forensic examiners, prosecutors, and others. The purpose is to discuss outcomes and review other sexual assault cases to determine the most appropriate response for victims whose cases are not likely to result in successful prosecution.

Conclusion

We know the vast majority of victims will not contact law enforcement to report their sexual assault, just as most will not seek out health care, victim advocacy, mental health care, or other social services. Many will not even tell their loved ones, but suffer their pain and shame in silence. We must do better.

One strategy for is to increase the ways in which victims can provide information to law enforcement. We have sought to promote this strategy with this training bulletin series as well as our [OnLine Training Institute](#) module entitled: *Reporting Methods for Sexual Assault Cases*. Both of these resources were designed to provide detailed information on the philosophy and implementation of alternative reporting methods.

However, we hope we have made the point that this is not something that can be accomplished by law enforcement agencies alone. Victims will only have full access to such options if they have support – from responding professionals as well as loved ones – at every stage of the process. Alternative reporting methods must therefore be seen as one component in a much larger reform movement.

We must find ways to improve our criminal justice and community response systems so they are easier to navigate and offer victims the support they need to reach out to law enforcement and stay engaged. In everything we do, we must continue to ask ourselves: *How we can help encourage sexual assault victims to reach out for support and to access our community response systems?* We look forward to working with you in the future, as we continue striving to answer this question in all of our communities.

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