



Kimberly A. Lonsway, Ph.D.
Sgt. Joanne Archambault (Retired, San Diego Police Department)

This is the fourth installment in our series of training bulletins exploring alternative reporting methods for victims of sexual assault. In previous installments, we provided an overview of the key terms and concepts of alternative reporting. In this bulletin, we introduce you to two communities that have done an excellent job of developing and implementing alternative reporting options for victims of sexual assault: Cambria County, Pennsylvania and Ashland, Oregon.

Cambria County Protocol for Anonymous Reporting

Criminal justice and community professionals in Cambria County, Pennsylvania worked together collaboratively for over three years to develop a comprehensive [sexual assault protocol](#) that includes anonymous and non-investigative reporting (for victims age 18 and over), including those who participate in a medical forensic examination.

By briefly discussing some of the factors that discourage victims from engaging the criminal justice system and other community resources, the goal for the protocol is clearly described as increasing victims' access to improve their well-being. Victim needs are placed at the center:

It is the expectation of our community that all sexual assault victims will be treated with respect and appropriate attention will be given to their emotional and physical needs, regardless of their decision whether or not to participate in the criminal justice process.

Components of the Multidisciplinary Protocol

The protocol then goes on to provide detailed information in the following areas:

- Statement of Purpose
- Guiding Principles
- Initiating Collaborative Responses
- Overview of Anonymous Reporting
- Roles and Responsibilities of Responders
- Protocol Checklist
- Role of Law Enforcement with Regard to Anonymous Reporting
- Law Enforcement Protocol with Regard to Anonymous Reporting
- Victim Advocacy Protocol with Regard to Anonymous Reporting
- SANE Protocol with Regard to Anonymous Reporting
- Response Contact Phone Numbers



The protocol provides clear expectations for all of the professionals involved in sexual assault response, stating that all victims are to be treated professionally and with dignity. The goal is both to promote their recovery and improve their ability to participate meaningfully in the criminal justice process. This is particularly true for victims who are unsure about whether to participate in the criminal justice process. In fact, this is the fundamental rationale for the program:

*It is for this reason that our protocol includes an option of anonymous reporting giving victims, **18 years of age and older**, needed time to decide if and when they are ready to engage in the criminal justice process. The objective is to promote better and more victim-centered care, support, and evidence collection and documentation, in order to increase reporting and ultimately hold more offenders accountable.*

For more information about the Cambria County Protocol, please see the [Model Policies](#) tab in the Forensic Compliance Resources section of our website.

Ashland Police Department's *You Have Options* Program

A second example of alternative reporting methods can be seen in the *You Have Options Program* created in Ashland, Oregon. As in Cambria County, this program was designed to expand the options available for sexual assault victims to contact the Ashland Police Department, thereby increasing access to the criminal justice system as well as other community resources. Also like Cambria County, the development of this program took years of work and required extensive collaborative effort between the police department and other professionals involved in responding to sexual assault. The program launched January 1, 2013.

As described on the Ashland Police Department's webpage, the immediate goal of the program is to "increase sexual assault reporting by eliminating as many barriers to reporting as possible." The long-term goal is then "to increase the identification and prosecution of sexual predators in our community, thereby decreasing sexual assault victimization."

Alternative Reporting Options

To meet these goals, sexual assault victims have the choice of reporting in a variety of ways:

*An **Information Only Report** includes any report of sexual assault where, at the reporting party's request, no investigative process beyond a victim interview and/or a complete or partial Inquiry into Serial Sexual Assault (ISSA) is completed.*

*A **Partial Investigation** includes any report of sexual assault where some investigative processes beyond the victim interview and a complete or partial Inquiry into Serial Sexual Assault (ISSA), have been initiated by law*

enforcement. This may include, but is not limited to, interviewing of witnesses and collection of evidence such as a sexual assault forensic examination (SAFE) kit.

*A **Complete Investigation** includes any report of sexual assault where all investigative procedures necessary to determine if probable cause exists for a criminal sexual assault offense have been initiated and completed.*

Victims Can Change their Minds

After victims of sexual assault have accessed a particular reporting method, they can change their minds, and decide at some later point to convert an *Information Only Report* to a *Partial* or a *Complete Investigation*. They can also initially request a *Complete Investigation* but change it to a *Partial Investigation* if it is not already concluded. Victims can choose to remain anonymous and/or they can choose to not identify the suspect. These options are provided even for victims who do not intend to participate in the criminal justice process, as a means of encouraging them to come forward to the police department with information about their sexual assault.

Regardless of which reporting method victims select, an officer with the Ashland Police Department will document in writing the information that is provided at that time. Even if the incident is outside the current statute of limitations, the information is documented. Current policy is to retain such documentation indefinitely within the agency's Records System.

Victims Will Not Be Pre-Judged

Perhaps most important, program materials clarify that the information – and the victim – will not be pre-judged:

All information received on a reported sexual assault shall be documented regardless of the apparent credibility of the reporter or apparent veracity of the information being provided. Failure to document all available information inhibits the ability of investigators to identify serial sexual perpetration.

Expanding Nationwide

With grant funding, the *You Have Options Program* has been expanded nationwide, so law enforcement agencies across the country can make the commitment to offer similar programs in their own communities. Agencies can decide to formally join the program and access all of the resources that are offered to participants, including a specialized database for recording reports and an externally managed website to provide information for victims and the community.

Full participation requires a formal agreement with the *You Have Options Program* and a documented commitment to meet a number of requirements for implementation, training, and

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support. Agencies can also draw piecemeal from the program materials, and implement only specific components, but if this strategy is pursued, agencies cannot then say they are offering the *You Have Options Program*. Among other requirements, participating law enforcement agencies must commit to training select personnel, to ensure the program is implemented with fidelity and all of the appropriate resources and infrastructure are allocated to support it.

For more information regarding the *You Have Options Program*, please see the [Reporting Options](#) tab in the Forensic Compliance Resources section of our website.

Up Next

Now that we have laid the groundwork for alternative reporting methods, we will begin discussing the important components to consider when implementing these methods in your community. The next installment in this series will focus on how to develop a multidisciplinary protocol for all of the professionals involved in responding to sexual assault.

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