

# Sexual Assault Victims' Experiences of Notification after a CODIS Hit

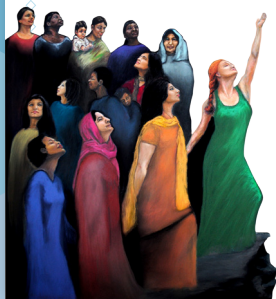
**A REPORT to the HOUSTON SEXUAL ASSAULT  
KIT ACTION RESEARCH WORKING GROUP**

*March 2015*

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2011, the National Institute of Justice provided funding for the Houston Police Department to form a multidisciplinary team to study the problem of sexual assault kits (SAKs) that had been collected but never submitted to a crime lab for screening and testing. The Houston Sexual Assault Kit Action Research Working Group sought to understand the factors that produced the volume of unsubmitted SAKs, the way forensic evidence is used during criminal investigations and prosecutions of sexual assaults, and what stakeholders should expect when large numbers of previously unsubmitted SAKs are tested. The project adopted a holistic approach and considered the broader issue of responses, beyond testing the kits, to sexual assaults in the community.

Houston's Sexual Assault Kit Action Research Working Group includes representatives from the following organizations:

- Houston Forensic Science Center <sup>2</sup>
- Harris County District Attorney's Office
- Harris Health System
- Houston Area Women's Center
- Houston Police Department Sex Crimes Investigative Units
- Memorial Hermann Health System
- Sam Houston State University – Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology
- The University of Texas at Austin – Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault

The group has been working collaboratively and collecting data that have allowed for an understanding of multiple aspects of the local response system. The organizations that have been working on this project have also been implementing and evaluating reforms that are meant to improve the response to sexual assaults. Action research entails an iterative process in which research evidence informs responses, and, for this reason, the project has generated multiple research reports. This is one of a number of reports and presentations that will be released to help other jurisdictions learn from our experiences as they seek to better understand and improve their own practices.

This project was supported by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, and the United States Department of Justice (Award No. 2011-DNBX-0002). The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice. The RGK Foundation also partially funded the research conducted by the Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault.

Learn more about the project at [www.houstonsakresearch.org](http://www.houstonsakresearch.org)

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<sup>2</sup> During the course of the project the crime lab was reorganized so that in April 2014 the crime lab became an independent organization from Houston Police Department.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is one in a series, and covers Phase III of data collection on victim notification. Phase I and II consisted of data collection with victims and professionals about their experiences with untested sexual assault kits and recommendations on victim notification procedures. Based on those findings, the Houston Sexual Assault Kit Action Research Working Group developed and implemented strategies for notification. This report covers Phase III, which consisted of interviews with victims who were notified about a CODIS hit and re-engaged in investigation of their case.

### *Purpose*

In Houston, victim notification involves reestablishing contact with victims whose cases are re-opened for investigation as a result of a match in the law enforcement database Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), from victims' recently tested sexual assault kits (SAKs). HPD and working group members designed the *Complainant Notification and Hotline Protocols* to outline victim notification procedures for each type of forensic analysis result. The *Protocols* present standardized, thoughtful, and sensitive responses to victims, which aim to increase victims' comfort and engagement with the criminal justice system and minimize risk for re-traumatization. This action research assesses the implementation of the *Complainant Notification and Hotline Protocols* by interviewing a small number of victims about their experience with notification by HPD investigators and the justice advocate, an advocate for victims.

### *Data Collection*

Seven victims described their notification experiences to a researcher during interviews lasting between 15 minutes and an hour. Participants were victims who had been re-contacted by an HPD investigator, and sometimes the justice advocate, as a result of a DNA match in the CODIS database.

### *Findings*

The results revealed that the *Complainant Notification and Hotline Protocols* were successfully implemented and well-received by victims.

#### **Positive Results of Notification**

1. All victims wanted to hear about their cases and did not regret being re-contacted.
2. All victims appreciated the support and help of the justice advocate.
3. Victims discussed positive aspects of being contacted at this later date – they described themselves as more mature and able to talk about and process their trauma more fully.
4. Victims appreciated the choice and opportunity to participate in their cases moving forward.
5. All victims commended the sensitive, compassionate, flexible, and caring treatment from investigators at the time of current notification.

### **Emergent Themes**

The data analysis revealed multiple themes from victims' notification experience, including:

1. Victims appreciated having more *choice/control*.
2. The *time lapse* had an important effect on their experience of moving on from the assault.
3. Several victims were trying to *make meaning* of their experience.
4. Deciding about whether to participate in their case going forward created a *moral dilemma* for some victims.
5. Victims faced many *barriers* in their current lives.
6. The notification process created both *danger and opportunity* for victims.
7. The *uncertainty* about the case outcome weighed heavily upon victims.

### **Victim Challenges**

Victims expressed a range of emotions, including disappointment and frustration with their initial contacts with the criminal justice system and their case delay. These related themes emerged:

1. All victims reported emotional reactions after being re-contacted after the long delay from their original report, including the triggering of past trauma related to the sexual assault.
2. All victims were frustrated about the length of time between their original report and the current notification.
3. Five of seven victims reported being treated poorly, including the police disrespecting them at the time of the original report and five of seven reported little to no follow up by law enforcement.

### **Recommendations**

The research team developed six recommendations to improve the victim notification process.

1. Law enforcement and the justice advocate must be prepared for a wide variety of emotional reactions from victims.
2. Law enforcement should demonstrate compassion, care, concern, flexibility, and accommodation towards victims to reduce the potential harm of re-traumatization at time of contact.
3. Law enforcement should receive training and continuing education on the impact of trauma to improve their response to victims.
4. The justice advocate must be included in the notification process in order to improve victims' experiences and reduce potential harm.
5. Law enforcement and the justice advocate should provide information on support services.
6. Law enforcement and the justice advocate should explain victims' options and choices related to participation in the case at the time of contact.

## BACKGROUND

The National Institute of Justice granted Houston Police Department (HPD) funding to study and address their inventory of untested SAKs. Two incidents initiated testing of these SAKs: funding from the National Institute of Justice and the City of Houston, and the passage of Senate Bill 1636 in 2011. HPD inventoried 6,663 untested SAKs on their property room shelves and began to test all.

In Phase I and Phase II of data collection (July 2011 – July 2012), the Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault (IDVSA) researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with sexual assault victims<sup>3</sup> and professionals to ask about victim notification best practice procedures. Although there were divergent opinions, the primary findings<sup>4</sup> included:

1. All victims should be contacted about their cases being reopened.
2. Contact was likely to trigger strong emotional reactions.
3. Impersonal contact such as letters and e-mails should be avoided. If letters need to be used, certified mail would maintain confidentiality.
4. Other contact methods should give victims the power to re-engage. Suggestions were websites victims could use to access information, call centers, and public service announcements (PSAs) by local media.
5. Spanish-speaking victims preferred to be contacted by Spanish-speaking officers and advocates.
6. Contact by both an investigator and a victim advocate was a best practice.

These findings resulted in several strategies to notify victims about forensic results<sup>5</sup>.

1. HPD hired a justice advocate who was embedded in the Adult Sex Crimes Unit to serve victims in both cold cases and new cases. The justice advocate's duties include crisis intervention, providing victims with information about the criminal justice process, resources and referrals, and serving as a liaison between the investigator and victim and between HPD and the community.
2. HPD created a CODIS Squad to investigate sexual assault cases from 2011 and earlier when forensic testing results returned; and move these cases forward to prosecution when possible. Twenty investigators were assigned to the CODIS Squad and were tasked with either adult or juvenile sex crimes cases. Additional investigators were assigned, and retired investigators were

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<sup>3</sup> A note about language: Throughout this report, survivors of sexual assault may be referred to simply as "victims" because this project is grounded in the criminal justice system and the usage acknowledges that a crime has been reported to a law enforcement agency. The word *victim* is not meant to be demeaning or judgmental. The project team recognizes that individuals have likely survived a combination of physical, emotional, and sexual trauma. As researchers, our aim is to honor every person's choice in language to describe themselves and to name their experiences.

<sup>4</sup> To read the about Phase I and Phase II in-depth findings, see the report – *How to Notify Victims about Sexual Assault Kit Evidence: Insight and Recommendations from Victims and Professionals*.

<sup>5</sup> For a description of the justice advocate position, the CODIS Squad, and the *Complainant Notification Protocol*, see the report – *Key Components of Building a Successful Victim Notification Protocol*.

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hired, to assist in the review of all cases as various results returned from forensic analysis. These cases included:

- Suspect CODIS hit (perpetrator DNA in a case hits to the DNA profile of a convicted offender or arrestee, identity is known);
  - Case-to-case CODIS hit (perpetrator DNA in one case hits to perpetrator DNA in another case, identity is unknown);<sup>6</sup>
  - DNA positive, CODIS eligible (perpetrator DNA entered into CODIS with no hits to any DNA at that time);<sup>7</sup>
  - DNA positive, CODIS ineligible (CODIS eligibility requirements not met, e.g., weak DNA results); and
  - Screening and DNA negative cases (no biological material detected, e.g., semen not detected in kit, or DNA testing failed to yield DNA results).
3. HPD and working group members designed the *Complainant Notification and Hotline Protocols* to outline victim notification procedures for each type of forensic analysis result. The *Protocols* present standardized, thoughtful, and sensitive responses to victims, which aim to increase victims' comfort and engagement with the criminal justice system and minimize risk for re-traumatization.

Beginning in January 2014, CODIS Squad investigators and, sometimes, the justice advocate<sup>8</sup>, contacted victims using the new *Protocols* guidelines. Victims were contacted when the case had a CODIS hit and had the potential to move forward. Generally, cases could move forward if the statute of limitations had not expired.

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<sup>6</sup> In cases with case-to-case CODIS hits, CODIS Squad investigators are notified if a CODIS hit occurs at any point in the future, and the case can be re-opened given the new information.

<sup>7</sup> In cases with DNA positive, CODIS eligible profiles, CODIS Squad investigators are notified if a CODIS hit occurs at any point in the future, and the case can be re-opened given the new information.

<sup>8</sup> Ideally, the justice advocate would be present for all contact, but capacity is limited to a single professional and it is not feasible at this time. The future plan is to hire additional justice advocates.

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## **METHODS**

Phase III (January 2014 – May 2014) of data collection is discussed in this report. Researchers gathered data through in-depth telephone interviews with seven victims to learn about victims' experience with notification after CODIS hits occurred in their cases. Data were analyzed using applied thematic analysis that identifies theme identification in aggregated forms to “find solutions to real-world problems”.<sup>9</sup>

### *Recruitment and Participants*

Investigators and the justice advocate provided victims with information on the research study. Victims voluntarily contacted researchers to participate in interviews about victim notification. Seven victims whose assaults occurred from 5 to 20 years earlier were interviewed. Demographics were not collected, but all victim participants were female.

In total, 472 cases were opened from January to May 2014, and of those, 377 cases were within the statute of limitations. However, researchers were unable to conduct an extensive review of how many victims were able to be contacted from the set of cases. Of the victims who were successfully contacted by CODIS Squad investigators and the justice advocate, seven contacted researchers to be interviewed.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

A researcher conducted the interviews and took extensive notes. Interviews lasted from 15 minutes to an hour. The interview schedule consisted of four initial questions listed below. Additional questions were asked for clarification.

1. How were you contacted?
2. Describe the experience of being contacted.
3. What assistance did you receive?
4. Is there anything else about this process you would like to tell us?

### *Protection of Human Subjects*

The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this research study. Victims gave verbal informed consent to participate. Interview protocols were designed to protect victims' privacy and well-being. Victims were compensated for their time and input.

### *Data Analysis*

Researchers analyzed extensive interview notes using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pg. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

### *Limitations*

The findings may be limited in several ways. First, the sample size is small, and therefore, the numbers of themes developed based on responses may be limited. While the findings here are considered valid, the participation of additional victims may have yielded additional themes. Second, self-selection bias may be present. Victims that voluntarily participated may have had different current or previous experiences than other victims with untested SAKs. Applied thematic analysis “may miss some of the more nuanced data”.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, IDVSA researchers are confident that the analysis (given the confirmatory processes used) and the findings yielded accurate and helpful dialogue for the field.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Current Contact*

The method of contact differed for the seven victims depending on how investigators were able to reach them. Investigators contacted victims in multiple ways (4 – door, 2 – letter, 3 – telephone). Investigators attempted initial contact with victims via phone calls to set up an in-person meeting. If phone contact was not possible, investigators attempted to notify victims at their homes. Certified mail was used as the final notification method if victims were not contacted via home visit or phone call. Overall, victims appreciated being notified and were satisfied with the way they were contacted. Victims expressed appreciation for how sensitively their cases were now being handled and the kindness of HPD investigators and the justice advocate, especially in contrast to how they were treated by police when first reporting the crime (see below – *Initial Police Contact*).

Even though the majority of contacts went well, there were some challenges. Victims expressed shock at having an investigator show up on their doorsteps. However, one victim stated that if she had been contacted by letter, she would have thrown it away or thought it was a parking ticket.

### *Initial Police Contact*

Although victims were not specifically asked about their initial contact with HPD upon reporting the crime, the topic arose, and most victims suffered a secondary victimization by the police reaction to their reporting of the crime. The majority of victims reported a very negative experience with HPD law enforcement representatives (both patrol officers and investigators) upon reporting the sexual assault. Victims felt judged and not believed by law enforcement, which was especially true if victims had been using drugs or alcohol at the time of the assault. Law enforcement representatives were described as rude and not caring. One victim reported feeling “*like garbage, like trash, no good*” when reporting the assault to the police. In another interview, a victim recounted that the responding officer said, “*If you weren't doing what you were doing, this wouldn't have happened to you.*”

### *Strong Feelings and Triggers*

All victims experienced strong emotional reactions as a consequence of being contacted, which occurred 5 to 20 years after the assault and initial police report. The emotional reactions ranged from shock, annoyance, fear, confusion, fright, depression, and anger, to happiness and appreciation.

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<sup>11</sup> Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pg. 17.

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The contact seemed to trigger feelings and memories of trauma from the primary and secondary victimizations: the first being the actual assault and the second being the reaction to the initial involvement with the criminal justice system.

The contact also triggered the emotions felt at the time of the assault with thoughts of blame and shame. Victims described themselves at that time as miserable, depressed, and ashamed to talk about the assault. One victim said the assault “*broke her*,” and she lived in fear, became celibate, and required medications and hospitalization. One victim spoke of being an “*emotional basket case*” and suicidal. For one victim, the contact also triggered memories of earlier child abuse and other incidents of sexual assault within her family.

Victims reported anger and frustration about the length of time that had elapsed since the assault. For instance, one victim said, “*I could have been dead by now.*” Victims reported that fear was triggered by knowing that the perpetrator could still be out on the streets. One victim wanted to know if the CODIS hit had been linked to a homicide. One victim was so angry she inquired about filing a complaint or talking to the media.

### *Danger/Opportunity*

This second contact by the police appeared to represent two sides of the same coin. That is, a possibility for danger and reactivation of the initial trauma existed, as well as an opportunity for healing through having the case move forward, being heard by police officers, and being supported by the justice advocate.

This second and more helpful contact with the police offered an opportunity to gain services, air grievances, and obtain information. The second contact also presented opportunities for healing. For instance, one victim reported that an investigator said to her, “*I want to apologize for the way you were treated by HPD 13 years ago.*” He went on to say, “*Drinking and drug use did not give the perp (sic) the right to attack you.*” Another victim said knowing that something is now being done on her case made her want to do something for herself and motivated her to take control and “*open myself back up to life.*”

### *Choice/Control*

Victims seemed very pleased that they were able to express their preference about participating in the case should it move forward in the criminal justice system. After feeling disempowered from the assault, discussions with investigators and the justice advocate provided opportunities for them to regain power and have their choices verbalized and validated.

Victims also appreciated the many opportunities they had for control and choice along the way, such as choosing where to meet the team. One victim noted her appreciation of the investigators’ and justice advocate’s willingness to accommodate her and their flexibility about meeting with her. For instance, one victim had childcare problems and appreciated the investigators coming to her home. Another had a home visit and wanted to meet in the front yard since her dog was in the house, and, again, the investigators agreed.

*This second contact by police appeared to represent a possibility for reactivation of the initial trauma, as well as an opportunity for healing.*

### ***Importance of Justice Advocate***

Victims described the importance of the justice advocate in the process. Victims received support, validation, information, and referrals from the justice advocate. One victim described the justice advocate as someone who could “*be there for me.*” Another said the justice advocate, “*listened, gave me space to cry, let me open up, and helped me express myself.*” Victims seemed to benefit from the justice advocate through the combination of both emotional and tangible support, such as assisting them with Crime Victims’ Compensation and informing them that free counseling services were available. It was clear that contact with the justice advocate was viewed very favorably as she was able to provide support and create trust.

### ***Time Factors***

The amount of time that had passed produced both positive and negative effects. For instance, some victims said that their memories were gone, that they had blocked out details of the attack, and that they could no longer identify the assailant. The length of time that had passed without case resolution angered and annoyed many victims. One victim whose case was being re-assessed five years after the assault asked, “*Why are they doing it now? Why did they wait so long?*” Also, many victims said they had “*moved on*” and did not want to relive the assault. However, several victims reported that since so much time had passed they were more mature and in a better place to deal with the issues and feelings that arose. Some expressed that their healing process helped them to handle the current trauma from being contacted again.

### ***Uncertainty***

Many victims expressed uncertainty and confusion that the case was re-opened, since there was no guarantee of a successful resolution. This uncertainty seemed to affect their emotions and their decision-making on whether to move forward with the case. The subtext seemed to be that they were fine with being contacted so late if something could finally be done about the case, but being contacted when there was a possibility of no resolution was troubling.

### ***Decision-making: A Moral Dilemma***

Making the decision about whether to move forward with the case presented victims with a moral dilemma. A first impulse was often one of self-protection in order not to relive the trauma of the experience. Several were afraid that re-opening the case would also reopen old wounds.

However, there were two reasons often cited by victims for moving forward in spite of their fears and personal discomforts: 1) to help other victims who could be potential victims if the perpetrator would not be held accountable and 2) to achieve justice by having the perpetrator held accountable by the criminal justice system.

### ***Spirituality and Meaning Making***

Two victims mentioned that their faith tradition played an important role in their recovery and one described praying about the decision whether to move forward. One victim said “*All of this has got to be for a reason*” while another said she had moved on and “*given it up to God.*”

### ***Current Barriers***

Besides triggering trauma from first and secondary victimizations, the contact and prospect of getting involved again in the criminal justice system elucidated current barriers and difficulties these victims faced in their lives that could affect their decision making and their subsequent involvement with the criminal justice system. Lack of transportation and childcare, mental illness, attempts to gain disability status, and current life stressors (living with daughter and grandchildren, mother dying) all affected and complicated their decision to move forward with the case.

### ***Best Practices***

Victims were asked directly what, if anything, could be done better by the Houston Sexual Assault Kit Action Research Working Group in regards to victim notification. One suggested that sending a letter to begin the line of communication might be better than having the investigators just showing up at the house since that was “*a shock*.” Having the justice advocate work in tandem with an investigator was viewed as very beneficial as was having a uniformed police officer come with the investigator so victims could trust that this was an official police visit. Contacting victims sooner and keeping them better informed about their cases over time were cited by a majority of victims as a helpful practice. One said, “*If perpetrators have not been caught, we live in fear every day. Don’t leave a victim hanging like that; at least contact us.*” Not being followed up with after the assault led to a lack of trust that things would be different at the time of second contact.

One victim would have preferred talking to a female officer and having a female Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE); she was raped by a man, and both the officer and the nurse she came into contact with were male. Also, she had been drinking and using drugs at the time of the assault, but wanted police officers to know that she was still a victim and did not deserve to be re-victimized by officers who judged her or who did not take her case seriously.

## **DISCUSSION**

These interviews and the subsequent data analysis revealed rich information that can inform best practices for HPD and other departments as well as enable advocates to better respond to victims contacted when their SAKs have a CODIS hit years after the sexual assault. Although there was variation in answers and some victims wanted their case to go forward while others did not, they spoke with a single voice on many topics.

### ***Positive Results of Notification***

1. All victims wanted to hear about their case and did not regret being re-contacted.
2. All victims appreciated the support and help of the justice advocate.
3. Victims discussed positive aspects of being contacted at this later date – they described themselves as more mature and able to talk about and process their trauma more fully.
4. Victims appreciated the choice and opportunity to participate in their cases moving forward.
5. All victims commended the sensitive, compassionate, flexible, and caring treatment from police at the time of current notification.

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### *Emergent Themes*

The data analysis revealed multiple themes from victims' notification experience, including:

1. Victims appreciated having more *choice/control*.
2. The *time lapse* had an important effect on their experience of moving on from the assault.
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6. The notification process created both *danger and opportunity* for victims.
7. The *uncertainty* about the case outcome weighed heavily upon victims.

### *Victim Challenges*

Victims expressed a range of emotions, including disappointment and frustration with their initial contacts with the criminal justice system and their case delay. These related themes emerged:

1. All victims reported emotional reactions after being re-contacted after the long delay from their original report, including the triggering of past trauma related to the sexual assault.
2. All victims were frustrated about the length of time between their original report and the current notification.
3. Five of seven victims reported being treated poorly including the police disrespecting them at the time of the original report and five of seven reported little to no follow up by law enforcement.

As a note, in the earlier interviews and focus groups from Phases I and II (July 2011-July 2012), victims and advocates felt that sending letters as an initial contact with victims would be viewed as too impersonal, but one victim in the interviews suggested just such an initial communication since seeing a police officer at the door out of the blue was so shocking.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are designed to emphasize important steps to create a trauma-informed, victim-centered notification experience that limits the potential for victim re-traumatization. The recommendation points below are either outlined or mentioned in the *Complainant Notification and Information Line Protocols* (specifically *Protocol for CODIS hit cases*). These recommendations reflect the successful elements of the current victim notification practices based on victims' experiences.

**Recommendation #1: Law enforcement and the justice advocate must be prepared for a variety of emotional reactions from victims.** Contacting victims can provide an opportunity for growth or danger and re-traumatization, or both. Investigators and advocates must be trained to respond to a variety of emotional reactions from victims, including anger, frustration, and sadness, to relief and appreciation. Understanding reactions will help to better equip professionals to respond in helpful ways to victims. A compassionate and supportive response will help to build rapport with victims and keep them engaged in the investigation when and if it moves forward.

**Recommendation #2: Law enforcement should demonstrate compassion, care, concern, flexibility, and accommodation towards victims to reduce the potential harm of re-traumatization at time of contact.** The point of contact with a victim is a moment when police officers can attempt to undo some of the harm and heal past pain that might have been caused by the responding police officer's poor treatment of the victim during the initial report.

**Recommendation #3: Law enforcement should receive training and continuing education on the impact of trauma to improve their response to victims.** Additional training on understanding victim experience is required in police academies and continuing education for officers. For example, training should include lessons on the impact of trauma and how to establish trust and rapport with victims. Officers also need to be aware of how bias and stereotypes can impact their investigations; and challenge themselves to explore and address these issues. For example, training should include exercises to explore commonly-held rape myths, such as "rape by an acquaintance or intimate partner is not real rape" or "victims are partly responsible for their sexual assault if they were using drugs or alcohol". As law enforcement authorities and first responders, their response to the victim has a lasting impact and treating a victim with care and compassion will result in a better experience for the victim and assist with the investigative process.

*Recommendations  
are designed to  
create a  
trauma-informed,  
victim-centered  
notification  
experience.*

**Recommendation #4: The justice advocate must be included in the notification process in order to improve victims' experiences and reduce potential harm.** Victims stated that the justice advocate is vital to managing the emotional process from the second and delayed contact. Revisiting the traumatic experience can be difficult, and having a safe space for expressing and processing emotions helps victims to stay engaged in the criminal justice process. Not only does this help to manage or reduce re-traumatization of victims, it also helps law enforcement meet their goal to keep victims engaged in the process. When victims are able to stay engaged in the process, an investigator may then be able to obtain information needed to proceed with the investigation.

**Recommendation #5: Law enforcement and the justice advocate should provide information on support services.** Victims described a variety of emotional reactions to the notification contact. Counseling and faith-based services helped them to manage the feelings that arose as a result of notification. Each victim received a *Resource List* with community resources and the justice advocate is assigned to discuss this information with victims. However, in the absence of the justice advocate, law enforcement should provide basic information on support services available, including rape crisis centers, national hotlines, mental health clinicians, and faith-based counselors. (Note: The *Protocols* (p. 5) state "All complainants should be provided with the SCU's Resource list, which includes...community resources.")

**Recommendation #6: Law enforcement and the justice advocate should explain victims' options and choices related to participation in the case at the time of contact.** Investigators and the justice advocate should explain victims' options and choices and leave the door open for victims to remain engaged in the ways in which they feel comfortable at that time. Investigators and the justice advocate can encourage the victim to make contact with any questions and concerns. Victims should also be asked about their contact preferences and whether and how often they would like to receive periodic updates.

## CONCLUSION

While some victims desire to be involved in the criminal justice system - to help prevent future sexual assaults and because it's the "right" thing to do - making contact with a victim many years after a sexual assault occurs can create a moral dilemma. Victims report that engaging with the criminal justice system can be a difficult and traumatizing process, so law enforcement and justice advocates should allow victims the choice of engaging with the criminal justice system. When victims choose to re-engage, it is the moral responsibility of these professionals to attend to the full spectrum of needs of victims throughout the process. We cannot avoid the emotional costs, but we can structure the involvement in a way that does not do more harm, that empowers the victim, and acknowledges the harm done by the offender. Understanding this process calls for more research with the goal of learning what additional information can be provided to support victims when they re-engage with the criminal justice system.