

A Multidisciplinary Approach to Cold Case Sexual Assault: Guidance for Establishing an MDT or a SART

A multidisciplinary approach to cold case sexual assault offers communities a coordinated, victim-centered response to the engagement of and care for sexual assault survivors; this approach also increases public safety by focusing on offenders—not victims—regardless of the causes, consequences, and issues surrounding sexual violence. Multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) and sexual assault response teams (SARTs) are specifically designed to serve victims of sexual assault; these groups provide community education to improve the response to sexual assault and ensure consistent messaging from practitioners through a systematic, informed understanding of victim-centered approaches to implement standards of practice.¹

SARTs and MDTs add value to the criminal justice system by

- ◆ providing expertise in investigation, victimization, medicine, prosecution, and advocacy;
- ◆ identifying issues from the perspectives of multiple professions and sharing related insight;
- ◆ recognizing victimization in earlier investigations through a trauma-informed approach;
- ◆ establishing investigatory leads through multidisciplinary review; and
- ◆ offering resources to support victims throughout the criminal justice process and encourage victim recovery.

A multidisciplinary team (MDT) is a working group that meets regularly and has members from several professions; an MDT addresses and identifies several types of factors (e.g., systematic factors, as well as those at the individual and organizational levels) that lead to high numbers of unsubmitted SAKs in a jurisdiction. The team also develops a comprehensive strategy to address these issues. This working group should comprise members of law enforcement,²

¹Simmons, Marya and Tremblay, Tom (Ret. Chief). *Sexual Assault Response Teams: Law Enforcement Role & Responsibilities*. (2017). The Wisconsin Sexual Assault Kit Initiative: Survivor Notification and Engagement. November 9–10, 2017. Appleton, WI.

²Including superior officers and officers that specialize in the area of sexual assault

forensic medical personnel,³ forensic laboratory personnel, prosecutors, survivors, victim advocates (both systems- and community-based), and victim mental health treatment providers.

A sexual assault response team (SART) is a community-based team that meets regularly and coordinates the response to sexual assault victims. The team may be comprised of sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs), sexual assault victim advocates, law enforcement officials, and prosecutors to develop insight into victimization and trauma-informed investigation; support the victim and provide expertise for prosecution; review current and cold case sexual assault files; and maintain a victim-centered, offender-focused approach to case review.

Characteristics of MDTs and SARTs

MDTs	SARTs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Serve larger communities such as at the state and/or multi-jurisdictional level ◆ Focus on overarching policies ◆ Develop model policies and procedures ◆ Provide information to stakeholders and community members ◆ Convene regularly, oftentimes monthly or quarterly ◆ Serve as coordinating council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Maintain a concentrated scope (local team focused on local cases, limited in geographic size) ◆ Provide technical assistance for all disciplines ◆ Offer case information to MDTs ◆ Convene regularly, often times monthly, with regular contact among members

MDTs and SARTs have many roles and priorities within their communities. Additionally, there could be communities and/or jurisdictions in which the MDT and SART might be made up of the same individuals performing all activities under one umbrella. In larger communities, the members of the SART could also be members of the MDT with SART activities focused on case review. Both types of groups can provide training and education to practitioners on

³Including sexual assault forensic examiners (SAFEs) or sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs)

a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach to sexual assault investigation and prosecution. The MDT and SART work together with local agencies to enhance equity and inclusion by ensuring that best practices and procedures are culturally relevant and inclusive of diverse communities, identities, and underserved and/or marginalized populations. In addition to helping local disciplines, local community outreach improves public safety for all community members, especially sexual assault victims. As a result, community members' level of trust is enhanced.

When coordinating an MDT or a SART to increase the efficacy of the team, current and new members must

- ◆ engage in mutual respect (i.e., value others' roles and have others value your role);
- ◆ serve as a resource to other team members;
- ◆ maintain good communication skills, both in and outside of meetings; and
- ◆ understand other team members' roles, including potential role limitations.

MDT/SART Efficacy

Characteristics that Reduce Efficacy	Qualities that Increase Efficacy
Large, disjointed MDT/SART	Core individuals on the team or subcommittees
Hierarchical relationships	Diffuse relationships
Lack of information sharing	Open communication
Confidentiality restrictions	Confidentiality agreements
Independent decision making	Collaborative decisions

FAQs for Establishing an MDT or a SART

How do you pick individuals for the MDT and/or SART?

Interested individuals who have demonstrated commitment to past projects and will prioritize the MDT or SART's activities should be invited to join the team; this is the preferred approach rather than assigning individuals. When evaluating proper representation from each discipline, ensure that officers, advocates, SANEs, and prosecutors who work with victims are invited to be part of the group. Allowing group members to communicate regularly with stakeholders and higher-level individuals will add to the team's success.

When available in the community, SART membership should include community- and systems-based advocates,

SANEs, investigators, prosecutors, and crime laboratory specialists. MDTs can include survivors, tribal leaders, and community stakeholders as well as representation from local victim services agencies, special population programs, and clergy and faith communities. As a best practice, include all available community agencies on the MDT that assist the victims.

Invite stakeholders and community leaders to MDT meetings to present milestones and highlight accomplishments. As a best practice, engage these individuals on a quarterly basis—if not more frequently.

How do you encourage people to start fresh with their relationships?

Concentrate on positive performances and outcomes. Begin or continue to build trust through inclusion; avoid too much criticism, which can negatively impact the level of trust. Highlight an individual's successes and/or positive performances.

MDT/SART success is maximized through the following actions from all team members:

- ◆ Valuing the role of others—understanding roles and role limitations
- ◆ Utilizing each other as a resource
- ◆ Creating open communication between MDT and SART members—establishing communication routes inside and outside of meetings
- ◆ Addressing impact of delay on survivors and committing to prevent future delays
- ◆ Empathizing with survivors and those who support them by understanding that there are no cold cases

What methods can be used to improve relationships among disciplines?

If you concentrate on having individuals who are committed to, and interested in, the MDT and/or SART, you can use the personality traits of each individual to the advantage of the team. Instead of fighting against different personalities, recognize them, use them, and give praise when a person does something positive to keep using their traits to the favor of the SART.

Individual personalities are all valuable for the responsibilities and roles of the MDT and/or SART. Members must be committed to improving sexual assault response and recognize the importance to public safety. If members are those who are doing the job and are interested, then there is no need to focus on stereotypes as you will have members who are working within their disciplines to create change.

If a member is not actively engaging, proactively recognize this and discuss it with the individual. If their work load will not permit their active participation, have them find a replacement to continue in their role.

How are cohesive MDT and/or SART relationships built?

Case review is a great way to build relationships and is paramount to ensuring all voices are heard. Start with a case that went well and praise all disciplines for their contributions to the success. It is vital to the group's growth that case review does not concentrate only on unsuccessful cases. As an MDT and/or SART is being established, pick four successful cases and one unsuccessful case to evaluate. To build trust, a SART can start with mock case reviews to prevent personal feelings about a case getting in the way of establishing positive relationships. Do not criticize disciplines, practitioner actions, or case outcome!

When case review shows good performance from a practitioner, send compliments to their superior. This recognition shows that the MDT and/or SART is reviewing cases in hopes of improving the future response to sexual assault.

What should case review of current and cold case sexual assaults include?

SART case review should provide all team members equal opportunity to

- ◆ understand how trauma impacts a victim's ability to participate in investigation
- ◆ identify evidence of trauma (e.g., delayed disclosure, minimization, contact with offender, behavioral changes, fragmented recall)

- ◆ gain insight into victimization by drawing from the expertise of multidisciplinary professionals
- ◆ focus on how the offender, including how they gained access and preyed on the victim's vulnerability

Successful MDTs and SARTs benefit their surrounding communities in several ways, including higher reporting rates, higher percentages of guilty pleas and successful prosecutions, better victim services, and improved victim recovery. Additionally, MDTs and/or SARTs improve and increase educational opportunities, and provide guidance through case review to allow disciplines to improve their response to sexual assault.

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