

# Key Considerations for Engaging and Maintaining a Multidisciplinary Team

The Bureau of Justice Assistance's National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) multidisciplinary team (MDT) model is imperative to successfully addressing sexual assault response reform. An MDT is a working group of individuals from varying disciplines collaborating on an issue. SAKI uses the MDT model to address sexual assault reform by (1) informing decision-making with the perspectives from each team member, (2) providing a victim-centered response to survivors, and (3) increasing coordination and public safety. The MDT model will set the tone for success in sexual assault response reform by using a holistic and sustainable approach.

An MDT meets regularly to identify and address the individual, organizational, and systemic factors that lead to many unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs) in their jurisdiction. The MDT develops a comprehensive strategy to address unsubmitted SAKs and provides equal assistance to all agencies that fall within that SAKI grantee's jurisdiction (including those in rural and tribal areas). The MDT should comprise the following:

- ◆ Law enforcement personnel (including supervising officers and officers that respond to and investigate sexual assault complaints)
- ◆ Forensic medical personnel (including sexual assault forensic examiners)
- ◆ Forensic laboratory personnel
- ◆ Prosecutors
- ◆ Victim advocates (both system and community-based)
- ◆ Victim treatment providers

Some areas may already have sexual assault response teams in place that could form the basis of the MDT.

SAKI recognizes some areas have difficulties convening an MDT with all disciplines represented. For these instances, SAKI suggests a minimum of a prosecutor, a law enforcement representative, and an advocate as core members, and recommends collaboration with forensic medical personnel.

The MDT could also invite members of other disciplines, as identified or as needed, to add perspective and understanding. These additional members could come from,

for example, multicultural community agencies, the military, school campuses, organizations that work with individuals with disabilities, and probation or parole services.

For additional information, please see the current [Bureau of Justice Assistance SAKI solicitations](#).

## Strategies Contributing to MDT Efficacy

MDTs engage in a peer-led process in which each discipline representative brings unique experiences to the group, which can improve responses to sexual assault investigations and reform. Active engagement and participation in the MDT are essential for success. Each member should feel empowered to speak about their experience in an open and honest forum. Members enhance equity and inclusion by contributing training and education, and improve victim-centered support throughout the jurisdiction by providing expertise in investigation, victimization, medicine, prosecution, and advocacy. This process adds value to the criminal justice system by identifying issues and sharing insights from various professions.

MDTs often have informal protocols but may consider using memorandums of understanding or confidentiality agreements between the MDT members to promote trust and ensure the integrity of an investigation when reviewing specific cases. It may benefit the MDT to track these cases to continue identifying areas of improvement (e.g., gaps) and successes. MDT's review can include policies and procedures, investigation innovations, victim engagement and services, and tracking sexual assault convictions.

An MDT focuses on positive performances and outcomes. Its success is maximized by valuing each discipline, respecting individual experience, and highlighting successes and positive performances. Each team member will gain a better understanding of the roles of others on the MDT, the limitations each role comes with, and how to work within their parameters to maximize benefits to survivors. Communication between members, both inside and outside of group meetings, should be open and encouraged. Members should see each other as resources. For example, law enforcement could request assistance on using victim services from advocates, a prosecutor could request case information from law enforcement, or various parties could request interpretation of a statute of limitation or a legal

definition from prosecutors. Collaborative efforts between members can create training opportunities wherein team members may learn, for example, to challenge the concept of “cold” cases because of the use of case reviews and new information and technology; how to empathize with survivors and those who support them; or how to address the impacts of delays on survivors and commit to prevent future delays. MDTs can concentrate on positive outcomes to model for SAKI, and future, investigations using the following methods:

- ◆ Avoiding criticism (which can lower trust between members)
- ◆ Using a peer-led, nonhierarchical structure
- ◆ Promoting communication both in and out of group meetings
- ◆ Valuing each member and what they offer to the team
- ◆ Creating understanding of the various roles involved
- ◆ Practicing confidential sharing of information to promote trust
- ◆ Focusing on positive performances and outcomes to model

## Improving Sexual Assault Response and Public Safety

MDTs serve a vital function in the legal and victim services community by bringing its members understanding of how trauma impacts a victim’s ability to participate in an investigation, and applying this knowledge toward reviewing SAKI cases and current cases, improving the response to sexual assault investigations and criminal justice system response. By meeting regularly to ensure consistent messaging in victim-centered approaches, discussing current trends, identifying future needs, and identifying gaps, the MDT can do the following:

- ◆ Develop or review model policies and procedures
- ◆ Conduct comprehensive case reviews
- ◆ Improve victim response
- ◆ Improve investigative response
- ◆ Enhance prosecution knowledge

## Training for Sustainability

Training for team development and response to sexual violence should be developed around victim-centered responses, which could include trauma-informed education, leveraging system- or community-based advocacy, and training around common legal themes (e.g., drug-facilitated sexual assault, alcohol and consent, evidence-based investigation, prosecution, and investigating despite delayed reporting). Training around advocacy services could highlight the benefits of confidential communications and overlapping resources.

Case reviews are a way to build bonds and hear all voices. Focusing on what went well and praising each discipline’s contribution to the successful handling of the case establishes positive relationships. Consider conducting tabletop case reviews (reviews of mock cases, from crime to court, with practical responses to the scenario determined by the various MDT disciplines involved) to build trust and a positive environment.

### Monthly Meeting Ideas to Keep MDT Members Engaged

- ◆ Case reviews
  - Conduct case reviews as a group, keeping in mind differing roles and respecting individual perspectives
  - Identify gaps in policy and protocols
  - Consider potential legislative improvements
- ◆ Status updates
  - Provide updates on cases and project goals
- ◆ Performance metric tool
  - Provide updated data for grant reporting measures
- ◆ Success stories
  - Update the group with successes in local cases as well as in projects
- ◆ Presentations on the following topics:
  - Each member’s specific discipline
  - Member wellness and coping with vicarious trauma
  - Alternative supportive strategies for victims such as therapy dogs

## Conclusion

For SAKI to be effective and sexual assault response reform to be sustainable, jurisdictions should establish a core MDT with experts across disciplines that will impact decisions on policy and procedure, investigative and prosecutorial determinations, and victim outreach. Members are encouraged to contribute expertise and experience to the group, focusing on victim support and an ongoing victim-centered approach to sexual assault response. This will improve the overall response to sexual assault by increasing coordination and sharing information regarding reviewed cases.

SAKI Training and Technical Assistance offers toolkit resources for support of a strong MDT:

- ◆ [SAKI Toolkit \(sakitta.org\)](https://www.sakitta.org)
  - [SAKI Toolkit: Multidisciplinary Response \(sakitta.org\)](https://www.sakitta.org)
  - [SAKI Toolkit: Multidisciplinary Cold Case Sexual Assault Review \(sakitta.org\)](https://www.sakitta.org)
  - [Benefits of a Coordinated Community Response to Sexual Violence by C. Mallios and J. Markowitz \(2011\)](#)
  - [A Multidisciplinary Approach to Cold Case Sexual Assault: Guidance for Establishing an MDT or a SART \(Sexual Assault Response Team\)](#)

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