

Victim Advocacy for Cold Case Sexual Assault: Developing a Work Plan

The National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI), a program supported by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, supports jurisdictions in creating a coordinated community response to ensure resolution to cold case sexual assault. By testing sexual assault kits (SAKs) that were previously unsubmitted to a crime laboratory and re-investigating the related cold case sexual assaults, jurisdictions ensure just resolution to sexual assault cases. Each kit represents a victim of sexual assault who is awaiting justice for their case. Victims may be notified of their SAK test results. At that point, an individual might consider re-engaging with the criminal justice system.

Even if they choose not to re-engage, victims notified in cold case sexual assaults need access to victim advocacy and support services. These individuals may not have received these services directly after the assault; the opportunity to re-engage with the criminal justice system could be their first experience with victim advocacy. The news that their kit has not been tested and the process of re-engaging into the criminal justice system could seem daunting, especially because a lot of time may have passed since the sexual assault. Victim advocates may be working with law enforcement and other members of their multidisciplinary team (MDT) to decide when and how cold case sexual assault victims should be notified that there are new developments in the case. For these reasons, cold case victim advocacy can seem complex. At its core, the mission of victim advocacy remains the same: Support the victim.

As members of MDTs and sexual assault response teams, victim advocates increase support for survivors of sexual assault and strengthen cases. Victim advocates bring training and expertise to these groups to help law enforcement, prosecution, and community stakeholders to

- ♦ provide needed services to victims,
- ♦ help with crisis intervention and safety planning, and
- ♦ maintain communication (e.g., check-in, case updates) with the victim.

Cold case victim advocates on the MDT or in the working group can partner with community- and systems-based advocates and other stakeholders to develop a victim-centered, trauma-informed work plan.

Designing a work plan will help focus ideas and determine the necessary steps to develop strategies. These strategies will help to achieve the MDT's goals toward providing services and care to cold case sexual assault victims. Many cold case guides and resources exist for law enforcement officials and prosecutors, but fewer resources are available to help victim advocates and rape crisis centers plan for the work that cold case sexual assaults require of them. By creating a work plan, cold case victim advocates can focus their ideas and visualize the steps needed to support both the victims and MDT members.

City of Duluth (Minnesota) Police Department (Duluth SAKI)¹

Community-based advocates collaborating with law enforcement at this SAKI site created the following work plan. This work plan guided the SAKI victim advocate's activities as the city began testing previously unsubmitted SAKs.

The Duluth SAKI Team's work plan provides an example of a tool that can be used to transition goals into action steps as teams begin defining their future paths. The community-based advocacy organization (CBA) referenced in the work plan is a full participating member of the Duluth SAKI MDT; this CBA provides valuable support to the team. Additionally, the individuals mentioned in the People Involved/Responsible column can be defined as follows:

- ♦ Site coordinator—Duluth site coordinator for the SAKI grant
- ♦ Initiative victim advocate—Victim advocate representative of the MDT
- ♦ Law enforcement representative—Law enforcement member of the MDT

Resources

For more information, refer to the Duluth SAKI Work Plan Example² (Table 1), Cold Case Sexual Assault Work Plan Template (Table 2), Work Plan Contact List Example (Table 3), and Work Plan Contact List Template (Table 4) on the following pages. Use these references to outline goals and actions steps to create a tailored strategy for your initiative.³

Table 1. Duluth SAKI Work Plan Example

I. Develop victim-centered protocols and practices for notification and follow-up with victims related to their previously unsubmitted SAKs.				
Goals	Actions	People Involved/ Responsible	Schedule	Resources
1. Review the scope of the problem locally and nationally	1a. Review publications from Detroit and Houston 1b. Interview stakeholders in Duluth 1c. Begin reviewing cases where the SAK was unsubmitted	1. Site Coordinator, Law Enforcement Representative, Initiative Victim Advocate	Start: Month 1 Duration: 3 months	1a. Publications from Detroit and Houston Research Action Projects 1b. SAKI TTA providers 1c. Other SAKI sites
2. Assist MDT in developing a draft Victim Notification Protocol (Standard Report)	2a. Interview community-based advocates for advice/guidance on protocol 2b. Review victim notification protocols distributed by other jurisdictions 2c. Develop a packet of tools that may be helpful for notification (e.g., sample letters, community resources, scripts)	2. Site Coordinator, Initiative Victim Advocate, Local Community-Based Advocates	Start: Month 1 Duration: 5 months	2a. Victim notification protocols distributed by other jurisdictions 2b. Trainings and guidance set by SAKI TTA 2c. Have draft reviewed by MDT 2d. Have draft reviewed by community-based advocates
3. Start an opt-in information line for victim-survivors who may have a previously unsubmitted SAK	3a. Review Houston and Portland’s publications on their information lines 3b. Develop a protocol for the information line to guide advocates answering the line 3c. Obtain a phone number and email for the line 3d. Name the line 3e. Develop outreach strategy to promote the line	3. Site Coordinator, Initiative Victim Advocate	Start: Month 2 Duration: 3 months	3a. Houston Police Department and Portland Police Bureau’s Information Line experience and publications 3b. SAKI TTA
II. Community education about the unsubmitted SAKs held with Duluth Police Department (DPD) and the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI)				
1. Inform the community about the scope of the problem and SAKI, provide information and receive feedback	1a. Reach out to local boards and commissions 1b. Reach out to service providers that may intersect with the victim-survivors we are looking for; present to their staff 1c. Present to Sexual Assault Multidisciplinary Action Response Team (SMART)	1. Site Coordinator, Law Enforcement Representative, Initiative Victim Advocate	Start: Month 3 Duration: 7 months	1a. Victim Notification Protocols 1b. Experiences from other jurisdictions, such as Detroit and Houston
2. Promotion of the opt-in hotline (Information line to give survivors the ability to control what they hear about their cold case sexual assaults and to ensure that survivors who want to know have that option.)	2a. Develop a flyer to post at social service agencies in Duluth and a business card for service providers 2b. Write a letter to the editor (<i>Duluth News Tribune</i>) explaining SAKI and the hotline 2c. Post hotline information to advocacy and law enforcement Facebook and Twitter pages	2. Site Coordinator, Initiative Victim Advocate, Communication Coordinator from CBA, Public Relations Officer from Police Department	Start: Month 4 Duration: 3 months	2. Marketing consultant from CBA
3. Outreach to victim-survivors	3a. Presentation and tabling opportunities where victim-survivors may be present (e.g., shelters, transitional housing, community college) 3b. Develop a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document to help victim-survivors better understand SAKI 3c. Begin victim notifications in cases in which the SAK was tested to completion or there was no evidence found in the SAK	3. Site Coordinator and Initiative Victim Advocate	Start: Month 4 Duration: N/A, ongoing	3a. Victim notification protocols 3b. Protocol subcommittee for case consultation 3c. Community-based advocates for case consultation

Review the following work plan template to identify, categorize, and plan action steps; this resource will be helpful to cold case sexual assault victim advocates and MDTs.

Table 2. Cold Case Sexual Assault Work Plan Template

I. [Action Step Title]				
Goals	Actions	People Involved/ Responsible	Schedule	Resources
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
II. [Action Step Title]				
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

Table 3. Work Plan Contact List Example

Person Responsible	Role	Contact Information
Jane Doe	Site Coordinator	xxx.xxx.xxxx
Self	Initiative Victim Advocate	xxx.xxx.xxxx
Jane Law Enforcement	Law Enforcement	xxx.xxx.xxxx
John Doe	CBA Communication Coordinator	xxx.xxx.xxxx
John Public Relations	Public Relations Police Department	xxx.xxx.xxxx

Table 4. Work Plan Contact List Template

Person Responsible	Role	Contact Information

References:

¹As community-based advocates collaborating with law enforcement, the Duluth SAKI Team set clear roles and boundaries—particularly around victim confidentiality. The victim advocates shared information only after receiving a survivor’s permission. The Duluth SAKI Team’s services retained all the qualities of community-based advocacy. For more information about the differences between systems- and community-based advocacy, visit www.sakitta.org/resources.

²The City of Duluth (Minnesota) Police Department (Duluth SAKI) authored the Duluth SAKI Work Plan Example (Table 1); Duluth SAKI received SAKI funding in 2015 and has used this money to test more than 100 previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs). Testing these previously unsubmitted SAKs has resulted in 31 Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) uploads and 14 hits, 10 referrals to prosecution, and 7 suspects charged with criminal sexual conduct-related crimes. In addition, the Duluth SAKI site implemented the Betty Skye information “opt-in” hotline and email in April 2016, which allows survivors to contact confidential community-based advocates to learn the status of their case and access the full range of advocacy services.

³The sample work plan is for the SAKI program. However, the work plan can still be a valuable tool for your agency’s approach to victim advocacy, even if your agency is not a SAKI grantee.