

Maximizing Investigative Leads: Recommended Practices for Communicating, Pursuing, and Tracking CODIS Hits

Overview

Since 2015, the Bureau of Justice Assistance has assisted state and local law enforcement agencies across the United States with clearing the backlog of previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs) and bringing perpetrators to justice through the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI).¹ The testing of SAKs and other evidence can lead to the development of DNA profiles eligible for upload into the FBI's Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), a program used to provide case-to-case linkages as well as case-to-named-offender/arrestee leads or matches. These linkages, or CODIS "hits," can provide valuable investigative leads for solving both stranger and non-stranger cases, including the identification of serial offenders and the prevention of future crimes (Campbell, Feeney, Pierce, et al., 2017).

Opportunities to capitalize on CODIS hits associated with unsolved sexual assaults and other violent crimes can be missed due to communication breakdowns or a lack of oversight and accountability (Campbell, Feeney, Fehler-Cabral, et al., 2017; Campbell, Feeney, Pierce, et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2019). When a CODIS hit occurs, the forensic laboratory is required to follow National DNA Index System (NDIS) procedures and notify the submitting law enforcement agency within 14 days of confirming the association. These written notifications include case details and hit type, enabling investigators to take subsequent actions, such as obtaining reference samples for confirmation testing. In some instances, CODIS hit notifications are sent via U.S. mail or emailed only to designated points of contact within a law enforcement agency. If this point (or points) of contact

has (have) transferred, been promoted, or retired without a replacement, then the CODIS hit notifications can be missed entirely. Even when notifications are received, there is no national requirement for law enforcement to respond or take action. The absence of formal policies or oversight can lead to procedural lapses or informational gaps. **Without multiple layers of accountability in place, CODIS hits may be inadvertently missed, not assigned, or filed away without being addressed.** To prevent these gaps, law enforcement agencies must establish robust policies and procedures for managing CODIS hit notifications. Effective communication between the law enforcement agency, forensic laboratory, and the prosecutors' office is required throughout the post-CODIS-hit notification and tracking process.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance, in conjunction with the National SAKI Training and Technical Assistance team, recommends law enforcement agencies establish clear and consistent protocols internally for how they receive, monitor, and pursue CODIS hits.

Recommendation #1: Establish and Regularly Update a Formal, Written CODIS Hit Policy for Your Agency

If no current written law enforcement agency policy exists that covers expectations, roles, and responsibilities for CODIS hit follow-up and tracking, then your agency should develop such a policy. If a policy already exists, then your agency should conduct an annual comprehensive review to identify areas for improvement.

¹. According to the FY2024 SAKI Site Solicitation, unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs) are defined as "SAKs that have not been submitted to a forensic laboratory for testing and analysis using CODIS-eligible DNA methodologies, which includes partially tested kits." A partially tested SAK is defined as "A SAK that has only been subjected to serological screening, or that has previously been tested with non-CODIS-eligible DNA methodologies (e.g., Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism or DQ Alpha)."

Preferable areas to address in the policy include the following:

1. Clearly define roles and responsibilities of all personnel involved—including the designated points of contact within your law enforcement agency, lead investigator, and supervisor—along with responsibilities for law enforcement interaction with the forensic laboratory and prosecutors' office. The timing of the required actions should also be specified. Consider including the responsibilities of each team member upon receipt of the notification; the following list outlines considerations for potential team members. For additional information on establishing a process for hit notifications, see **Recommendation #2**.
 - ♦ **Designated law enforcement point of contact:** If your agency has a liaison or designated point of contact (e.g., non-sworn case manager), this individual should confirm receipt of the notification by contacting the forensic laboratory or denoting receipt in any existing electronic systems necessary. If this role does not exist, these actions would fall to the **lead investigator**.
 - ♦ **Lead investigator:** Upon receiving the hit, the lead investigator should log the notification in electronic systems as needed and save the communication into the case file, then notify relevant parties within the agency of potential next steps. The lead investigator should also be responsible for updating electronic tracking systems as the case evolves.
 - ♦ **Law enforcement supervisor:** Upon receiving the hit, the supervisor should review the notification to ensure there are no outstanding questions or misinformation. The supervisor should also review any electronic entries made by the lead investigator.
2. Take steps to ensure that the policy is understood and followed consistently in practice by all personnel. Supervisory activities should be implemented to reinforce compliance and address any gaps in practice.
3. Provide regular training to all relevant personnel on CODIS hits, including how to read and interpret a CODIS hit notification, the expectations and needs from the forensic laboratory perspective, and what steps are expected from an investigative and tracking perspective.
4. Review the policy regularly (recommended annually) to evaluate its effectiveness and provide an opportunity for any updates or improvements as necessary. Review and input on the policy should also include perspectives from multidisciplinary partners such as prosecutors, forensic laboratories, and victim advocates.

Recommendation #2: Establish a Consistent and Reliable Process for CODIS Hit Notification

A clear and reliable process for receiving and responding to CODIS hit notifications is essential for timely and effective follow-up. Traditional notification methods, such as sending letters via U.S. mail, should be avoided due to the lack of reliability and increased chances the notification could be missed. If this method is used, it should only be done in conjunction with another form of communication, such as an email or phone call.

Recommendations for the CODIS hit notification process include the following:

1. Establish a web-based application or platform for secure information sharing between the forensic laboratory and relevant partners (e.g., law enforcement agency, prosecutors' office) to receive CODIS hit notifications. If a shared platform is not feasible, each relevant partner agency should establish a shared email inbox or address for their organization designated to receive CODIS hit notifications from the forensic laboratories. Multiple people should have access to their organization's CODIS-specific email address. For your law enforcement agency, this could include the lead investigator, the investigations supervisor, and commander. For the prosecutors' office, the assigned attorney and their supervisor should be included. The law enforcement agency and prosecutors' office's mailboxes should have settings that automatically send a receipt notification to the forensic laboratory when the agency or office opens a hit notification.
2. Document receipt of the CODIS hit within your law enforcement agency's record management system to ensure consistent tracking and accountability. In addition, the CODIS hit should be retained so that it is viewable and retrievable as part of the case record.
3. Assign a law enforcement investigator to research the hit and determine the next investigative steps within 5 business days of receipt of the initial CODIS hit notification. Also, this individual should document that this initial review has been completed when done.
4. Monitor and discuss the status of CODIS hits with forensic laboratories, prosecutors, and victim advocates at routine (e.g., every 2 weeks, monthly) multi-disciplinary team meetings.

5. In alignment with your agency's victim notification protocols, notify the sexual assault victim about the CODIS hit, explaining its relevance to the investigation and any potential implications. Prioritize trauma-informed practices to support the victim during the notification process. For more information, view these SAKI resources:

- ♦ [Victim Notification: Why, When, and How – A Guide for Multidisciplinary Teams](#)
- ♦ [12 Key Questions to Guide Victim Notification Protocols](#)

Recommendation #3: Address CODIS Hit Follow-Up Tracking and Accountability

CODIS hit notification is an important first step, but measures must be put in place to track each CODIS hit to its final case resolution. Timely and consistent follow-up of CODIS hits is essential for advancing investigations and ensuring justice. The implementation of a tracking system ensures accountability and facilitates collaboration between the forensic laboratory, law enforcement agency, and prosecutors' office. Some agencies, with the help of their internal information technology department, have successfully developed their own forensic hit tracking systems. Other agencies have implemented proprietary applications offered by third parties. Each jurisdiction has unique needs and resources, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Collaboration between the forensic laboratory,

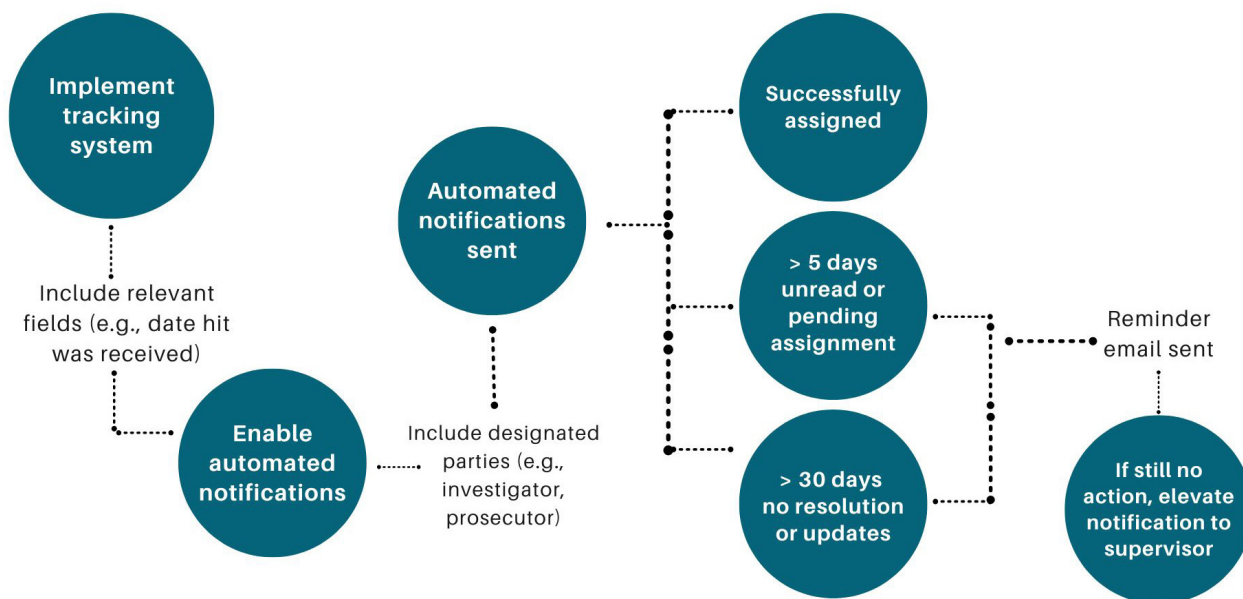
law enforcement agency, and prosecutors' office is critical to finding the best solution for each jurisdiction.

Recommendations for CODIS hit tracking include the following:

1. Implement an electronic tracking system or database to manage the status of CODIS hits. The tracking system ideally should be accessible by the forensic laboratory, law enforcement agency, and prosecutors' office to support interagency coordination.
2. The system should include the following fields: date the hit was received, name of the individual assigning the hit, assigned investigator, date the hit was assigned, status of the case, and date(s) of case status changes.
3. Automated email notifications should be sent to designated parties within the forensic laboratory, law enforcement agency, and prosecutors' office when the hit is received and when updates are made to the case status.
4. Automated email notifications should be sent to designated supervisory or command personnel within the law enforcement agency if the status of the case remains **unread** or **pending assignment** for more than 5 business days.
5. Automated email notifications should be sent to designated supervisory or command personnel as well as a forensic laboratory administrator if the status of the case remains as **assigned-active investigation** for more than 30 days without resolution or updates.

For a visual representation of the recommended CODIS Hit Tracking Process, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Recommended CODIS Hit Tracking Process



Ensure quarterly review and update of agency contacts within system.

6. If no action is taken by the designated supervisory or command personnel after a case remains assigned-active investigation for more than 30 days without resolution or updates, the automated notification should be elevated to another designated point of contact. This could be the SAKI Site Coordinator (if applicable), a prosecutorial contact, or other higher-ranking law enforcement official.
7. Ensure quarterly review and update of agency contacts listed as designated recipients within the tracking system.

Conclusion

To improve the collective response to sexual assault investigations, measures must be taken to create accountability in the CODIS hit notification and tracking process. This SAKI brief summarizes the recommended steps for achieving this goal, including the importance of developing and maintaining a law enforcement agency policy that defines how CODIS hits and follow-up actions are tracked and verified. Ultimately, creating a more consistent and comprehensive process can help improve case outcomes while also maximizing case leads and opportunities for pursuing justice for victims.

Additional SAKI Resources

- ♦ [Strategies for Sexual Assault Investigators: Prioritizing CODIS Hit Follow-up](#)
- ♦ [Cold Case CODIS Hit Review and Investigation: Additional Strategies for Sexual Assault Investigators](#)
- ♦ [SAKI Toolkit](#)

References

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