Sexual Assault Kit Evidence Tracking: Managing Critical Information

This document provides an overview and key considerations for jurisdictions interested in implementing or improving evidence tracking systems for sexual assault evidence. Previous research has demonstrated that most U.S. law enforcement agencies do not have computerized systems in place for tracking sexual assault kit (SAK) evidence within their agencies, much less from the point of SAK collection through adjudication.¹

Evidence tracking systems allow jurisdictions to record, catalog, and track evidence as a case proceeds through the criminal justice system and support successful investigations and prosecutions. Evidence tracking systems designed to manage SAK evidence give jurisdictions the ability to manage and track the status of kits, including the storage, testing, and transport of the evidence. Some SAK tracking systems also provide investigators the ability to capture additional offender behavioral and modus operandi (MO) data that can assist them with future investigations.

Implementing an effective sexual assault kit evidence tracking system is a major objective of the Bureau of Justice Assistance’s (BJA’s) Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI). The use of an electronic evidence tracking system can create more efficiency and accountability in SAK evidence processing, thereby preventing the accumulation of unsubmitted kits.²³⁴ Effective evidence tracking systems allow key stakeholders—including investigators, crime laboratories, prosecutors, and, in some instances, victims—the ability to share information about investigations and evidence efficiently, which helps mitigate communication problems at the system-level.⁵


More information on evidence tracking systems implemented by SAKI sites can be found in the SAKI webinar “SAK Evidence Tracking: Features & Considerations,” and as new SAKI sites implement systems these will be highlighted on the SAKI website (www.sakitta.org).⁶

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² Strom et al., 2009
Evidence Tracking Systems: The Basics

Why are they important?

Evidence tracking systems are key to a jurisdiction's efforts for SAK evidence reform, because they provide a mechanism for issues critical for reform, including:

- establishing evidence tracking, case management, and victim notification mechanisms;
- enhancing a jurisdiction's ability to manage and monitor the progress of kits through the evidence collection and testing process;
- enhancing case management capabilities that assist in case assignment, tiered supervisory review, and electronic case tracking; and
- providing victims with access to information about the status of their case.

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11 Santos, 2016.

What do they do?
From a functional perspective, evidence tracking systems improve a jurisdiction's ability to do the following:

- **Collect/Catalog Key Information.** Collecting critical data elements about SAK evidence is fundamental to a jurisdiction's ability to prevent overlooked evidence. Type of data that should be collected by an evidence tracking system includes the following:
  - **Unique item identification**—description of item, unique number identifier
  - **Location**—location of item in property/evidence storage room or other external location(s), such as court, a crime laboratory, or another investigative agency, location (e.g., shelf number or bin) where evidence is stored, date/time/identity of person who stored the evidence
  - **Data elements unique to sexual assault investigations**—offender MO and unique crime elements not typically stored in specific data elements within an RMS

- **Track/Audit.** The monitoring and accounting of SAKs through the course, or path, of their movement from collection through final disposition, which is called chain of custody. Information tracked includes date/time/identity for individuals who collected evidence, any person(s) in possession of the evidence at scene and during transport, date/time/identity of person who submitted the evidence, date/time/identity of property/evidence custodian who accepted/received the evidence, date/time/identity of any person to whom the evidence was released and who returned it.

- **Report.** The task of delivering a written, detailed report to the appropriate entity within the prescribed time period and with the applicable data provided.

- **Inventory.** A detailed and descriptive list of articles or items (for purposes of this solicitation, SAKs) containing information such as, but not limited to: item identifiers, quantity, and location of the item.

Technical Implementation Considerations
Evidence tracking systems can vary in their complexity and capabilities, which in turn affects a system's cost. Implementation issues to consider include the following:

- **Implementing a single or multi-jurisdictional system.** Evidence tracking systems can be implemented within a municipal site, as well as systems set up to track evidence across an entire state which can bring additional challenges in terms of coordinating across multiple agencies and jurisdictions often within a voluntary framework.

- **Building or buying.** Jurisdictions can build a custom/in-house evidence tracking system as other jurisdictions have done or decide to procure a commercial off the shelf (COTS) evidence tracking system.

- **Installation.** Evidence tracking systems can be installed on your jurisdiction's network or you can choose to use a CJIS compliant cloud-based system that is hosted by the service provider.

- **Support.** Evaluate the level of IT support and infrastructure required of the system.

- **Cost.** Your jurisdiction should understand the costs, both for implementation and ongoing maintenance, for the type of system you are considering.

Recommendations for Getting Started
As jurisdictions consider and begin planning for an evidence-based tracking system, a number of critical steps should be taken to determine the capabilities, functionality, and oversight of the planned system. These include the following recommendations:

- **Establish or convene an existing multiagency working group.** Effective SAK evidence tracking cannot be thought of as just a law enforcement or crime laboratory issue, but rather should incorporate all stages of SAK processing.
  - Which law enforcement, prosecution, forensic laboratory, and victim advocacy stakeholders from your jurisdiction are important to include so that everyone can have input from the start about what the evidence tracking system should be able to do?
• Educate and make all other relevant stakeholders—agency heads, legislators, advocacy groups, and community leaders—aware of the effort and provide a business case for why it is needed.
  ▪ What message around sexual assault kit tracking is key to each of these groups?
• Establish key definitions (e.g., untested SAK; audit) for the jurisdiction that are relevant to the evidence tracking system function and purpose.
  ▪ For example, what do key terms used as part of the tracking system mean and what does a count of SAKs from the system represent?
• Define when the tracking of each SAK starts.
  ▪ Will the tracking start at the point of SAK collection at the medical facility? If not, what will be the starting point for tracking
  ▪ How can you ensure that all collected SAKs will be tracked?
• Understand the IT capabilities and setup in your jurisdiction and any issues that must be addressed
  ▪ Are IT resources managed by another entity within your jurisdiction and outside of your direct control?
• Determine the scope of your system.
  ▪ Will it be a statewide evidence tracking system due to state mandate?
  ▪ Is it a local or regional system?
  ▪ Will it track the status of the SAK from point of collection through adjudication and victim notification?
• Define who the primary users of the system will be and who else will have access.
  ▪ Who needs access?
  ▪ Who will enter information?
  ▪ How will investigators enter and utilize the data?
• Ensure that confidentiality of victim information will be addressed as the system is implemented.
  ▪ How will victims be protected but also be able to access information about the status of their case?
• Discuss how regular system audits will be conducted.
  ▪ How will the systems be validated and checked routinely?
  ▪ Who will perform these routine system audits?

Additional Resources

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