



As a sexual assault victim, you may find that maintaining engagement with the criminal justice system feels overwhelming—especially if a significant amount of time has passed since the assault. The criminal justice process may feel drawn out, and you may need to focus on your livelihood, family, needs, and/or personal healing at different times during the process. Ultimately, justice looks different for every survivor. Engaging with the different steps throughout the criminal justice process may provide the closure you need for healing.

“ Ultimately, justice looks different for every survivor. ”

This National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative Training and Technical Assistance (SAKI TTA) resource provides guidance for sexual assault survivors who have chosen to proceed with the criminal investigation and engage with prosecution so that they feel more at ease as their case moves through the criminal justice system.¹



Author:

Marya Simmons is a SAKI TTA partner and consultant with extensive experience training victim/witness advocates and providing ongoing support and crisis intervention for victims. Ms. Simmons also serves as a liaison for victims with prosecutors and law enforcement officers. Previously, Ms. Simmons served as the victim-witness unit supervisor for the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office in Ohio.

More Information:

Visit www.SAKITTA.org for additional information or contact us at sakitta@rti.org.

National Resources:

RAINN National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline:
1.800.656.HOPE (4673)

VictimConnect National Hotline for Crime Victims:
1.855.4.VICTIM (842846)

Domestic Violence Hotline:
1.800.799.SAFE (7233)

Suicide Hotline:
1.800.273.8255

Joyful Heart Foundation:
1.212.475.2026

The Office for Victims of Crime:
1.800.363.0441

Engaging with Prosecution: Guidance for Sexual Assault Survivors



What you can expect and what you may request during your communications with law enforcement.

¹For a more detailed description of the criminal justice process, read the SAKI TTA briefs (1) What Happens Next? Victim Resources for Support, Questions, and Information in Cold Case Sexual Assaults (http://bit.ly/saki_ccsa) and (2) What Happens Next? Resources for Support, Questions, and Information (http://bit.ly/what_happens_next_resources).

This project was supported by Grant No. 2015-AK-BX-K021 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. For more information, visit www.sakitta.org.



Who will you work with on your case?

This answer depends on your jurisdiction. After a thorough investigation concludes, a prosecution team will be assigned to your case once the suspect has been indicted (i.e., formally charged with a crime). A prosecutor's primary goals are to



- ◆ hold offenders accountable for their crime(s),
- ◆ act as advocates in seeking justice, and
- ◆ keep the community safe.

Prosecutors who work on sexual assault cases have undergone specialized training to understand the effects of trauma experienced by sexual assault victims and to prosecute sexual assault cases effectively.

Request support:

You do not have to go through the criminal justice process alone. You can request support at any time during the process. Victim advocates have specialized training and expertise in sexual assault cases and the criminal justice system. Ask a victim advocate to connect you with a professional who can

- ◆ keep you informed about the status of your case;
- ◆ provide community resources, such as counseling;
- ◆ ensure you are informed of your rights;
- ◆ provide safety planning; and
- ◆ support you in meetings with prosecutors and at court proceedings.

“Community- and systems-based victim advocates provide a specialized support system to ensure your needs are met; receiving support from these advocates may be critical to a successful case outcome.”

Next steps:

After the indictment, prosecutors will participate in the pretrial process with the defense attorney(s). Defense attorneys represent the defendant to protect their constitutional rights during the criminal justice process. By law, the prosecutor must exchange evidentiary information with the defense attorney. The prosecutor will discuss the case with you and maintain consistent communication with you. Your participation provides prosecutors with a better understanding of the crime—thus allowing effective prosecution of your case, regardless of the final outcome. If you have questions at any point, reach out to the prosecution team and victim advocates to obtain information.



“The prosecution team and victim advocates can answer questions you have during any stage of the process.”

Your participation matters:

As a sexual assault survivor, you play a vital role in the criminal justice system. The prosecution team will review the initial report(s) to gain an understanding of your case and understand that it may be difficult for you to discuss sensitive information, especially when a significant amount of time has passed since the assault. They will want to meet with you in person to introduce themselves, discuss the case, and obtain your input.



The prosecution team may ask you the same or similar questions that were asked in the investigative phase. This repetition is important to further building the case in the prosecution phase. The prosecution team supports you and values your input. If your case proceeds to trial, the prosecution team will meet with you and assist in preparing you to testify.

“Sexual assault survivors play an essential role in the criminal justice system.”

Working together:

The prosecution process takes time. A significant amount of time may have passed since the crime occurred; additionally, gathering necessary evidence and preparing your case may be a slow process. You may find that you need to focus on other important aspects of your life, which may cause the criminal justice process to feel overwhelming. Having patience through the process can be challenging, and you may have questions and concerns. Maintaining



communication with the prosecution team and victim advocates is important so that they can keep you informed about what is happening and prepare you for the next steps in the process.



Engaging with the prosecution team strengthens their level of understanding about *who you are* and how the crime *affected you*; working with this team can also provide the closure you need for healing. Remember that justice looks different for every survivor. Taking care of yourself and acknowledging when additional support is needed can reduce these feelings and encourage healthy coping skills. Victim advocates can connect you with specialized support services (e.g., counseling/therapy) at any stage in your case, and they can assist as you work through your feelings about not only the assault but also the judicial system process.

“Engaging with the prosecution team strengthens their level of understanding about who you are and how the crime affected you.”