

Opt-In Notification: Providing Victims the Opportunity to Make Initial Contact About Their Sexual Assault Kit

The National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative Training and Technical Assistance (SAKI TTA) Team recognizes that each sexual assault victim is a unique individual who experienced a very personal, traumatic event. Understanding how to appropriately reengage cold case sexual assault victims is a critical aspect to a trauma-informed approach; such an approach minimizes retraumatization when asking victims to participate in the criminal justice system. Developing a victim-centered procedure to contact a victim is a complex process; therefore, one single best practice does not exist. The SAKI TTA Team recommends jurisdictions (1) use a multidisciplinary approach to determine the most appropriate notification process and (2) develop victim notification protocols that will not only employ trauma-informed, victim-centered procedures but also optimize community resources. SAKI TTA offers resources to assist with developing agency victim notification and engagement protocols. These resources can be found in the SAKI Toolkit¹ and SAKI Virtual Academy.²

The SAKI TTA Team recommends that agencies develop an opt-in notification process that provides an opportunity for every survivor to make initial contact and seek information about their case, giving choice and control back to the survivor. This resource highlights opt-in notification options that can complement an active victim notification protocol and serve as part of an agency's effort to reach cold case sexual assault survivors.

Opt-In Contact Methods

Opt-in notification method(s) should put survivors in control if and when they want to learn about the status of their sexual assault kit (SAK) and cold case. These methods should also include mechanisms to connect survivors to resources in their community. Agencies should select the appropriate opt-in notification method(s) and then assess the accessibility of the selected methods. Following are methods for opt-in contact:

- ◆ Hotlines accessible 24/7 or staffed at specific times
- ◆ Agency email address monitored 24/7 or at specific times
- ◆ Secure online forms
- ◆ Victim web portal (can be housed within evidence tracking system or on separate website)

System Logistics

Ensuring that survivors are connected to appropriate resources, support services, and professionals while minimizing retraumatization can be done through a well-vetted procedure that explains the method(s) and provides logistics for each method's operation. Consider the following details when developing opt-in notification procedures:

- ◆ Ensure each method has the appropriate level of confidentiality (e.g., protected online access and/or dedicated monitoring staff).
- ◆ Define the hours of operation for each method of communication (e.g., hotline, email address, and/or online form submission).
- ◆ Maintain the recommended response times.
- ◆ Create strategies to advertise hours of operation and response times.
- ◆ Determine if an automated response is appropriate for each communication method; if yes, ensure the automated response conveys a positive message.
- ◆ Document all follow-up procedures, including what information may be included in a return voicemail or email.
- ◆ Provide lists of available resources and referral opportunities to ensure victims are connected to support services.
- ◆ Identify additional support that may be required for addressing the needs of marginalized or special populations.
- ◆ Determine additional languages (aside from English) that are necessary to support the community.
- ◆ Develop a list of approved translator services, if necessary.

Training and Self-Care

Staff members who are responsible for responding to inquiries should have clear direction and guidance pertaining to their level of responsibility and appropriate

¹ Visit the SAKI Toolkit at http://bit.ly/SAKI_Toolkit for additional victim notification resources.

² Developing a Victim Notification Protocol available in the SAKI Virtual Academy <https://academy.sakitta.org/>.

actions to take. Prior to taking responsibility for the opt-in notification method(s), staff members should be informed about the expectations related to the agency's protocols; this information will help staff members answer the following questions:

- ◆ Who will respond to the information requests?
- ◆ How will survivor identity be verified?
- ◆ What information is appropriate to share in electronic communications and/or phone calls with a victim?
- ◆ What steps should be taken when a survivor experiences an acute crisis?
- ◆ How will requests for other areas of support be handled? (e.g., cold case sexual assault survivor not included in their jurisdiction's SAKI program; survivor of a crime that is not related to sexual assault; someone reporting an emergency or attempting to reach law enforcement)
- ◆ How will a situation be handled when a caller is being verbally abusive or using obscene language?

In addition to training staff members about how to manage challenging situations effectively, agencies should help staff members develop self-care plans to support their personal health and wellbeing, manage stress, and maintain professionalism when responding to survivors. Prioritizing staff members' wellbeing through resources and support ensures a well-functioning team that provides survivors the assistance they need and deserve.

Get the Word Out About Opting In

Creating a hotline or an online system is only one step in defining the opt-in notification process. Messaging campaigns are important for publicizing opt-in notification to survivors and can also illustrate to the community that the jurisdiction takes both sexual assault and the issue of unsubmitted SAKs seriously. Many agencies have found that a robust, continual messaging campaign is necessary to engage survivors and to sustain knowledge about opt-in notification. Agencies with opt-in notification processes have used flyers, public service announcements, social media, and other media outlets to explain the methods of contact, how survivors can access their information, and what services survivors will receive when reaching out to these information systems.

Ensure that survivors understand that this free service will provide information about their SAK and will connect them to trained victim advocates. Opt-in notification encourages survivors to reach out for additional support.