

Considerations and Suggested Practices for Statewide Sites to Support Sexual Assault Response Reform in Small and Rural Jurisdictions

The Bureau of Justice Assistance National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) provides grantees from local and state jurisdictions with federal funding to support a multidisciplinary, coordinated community response to violent crime that enhances jurisdictional capacity to inventory, track, and test previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs); produce protocols and policies aligned with national recommendations to promote sustainable violent crime response reform; and seek just resolution to cold cases while promoting survivor healing. Currently, the SAKI program has 30 statewide sites able to provide SAKI resources to all agencies within the state in support of sexual assault response reform.¹ Recognizing that smaller agencies face unique challenges when striving to implement sustainable sexual assault response reform practices, statewide SAKI sites should have a strategic plan for engaging with small and/or rural agencies to provide support and to include an outreach strategy, as smaller jurisdictions are often unaware of the SAKI program and the resources available to them. This brief presents considerations and suggested practices for statewide sites to support small and rural law enforcement agencies seeking to address sexual assault response reform. For more information specific to the implementation of sexual assault response reform on tribal lands, please see *Considerations and Suggested Practices for Implementing Sexual Assault Response Reform on Tribal Lands*.

Small and Rural Law Enforcement Agencies Face Unique Challenges

According to the 2020 Census, 20% of the United States' population resides in rural areas.² While law enforcement agencies serving these populations face many of the same issues as their urban counterparts, there are unique challenges specific to small jurisdictions that cause additional strain and lead to an inability to develop comprehensive strategies to combat sexual assault.

¹ For a list of statewide SAKI sites, please visit <https://sakitta.org/sakisites/> or contact sakitta@rti.org.

² United States Census Bureau (2023). 2020 Census urban area facts. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2020-ua-facts.html>

Such challenges may include funding, staffing, training, technology implementation, and access to community-based resources. Table 1 provides an overview of these specific challenges.

Table 1: Unique Challenges Faced by Small Law Enforcement Agencies

Funding	Rural areas have a smaller tax base, impacting overall budgets and resulting in less funding for pertinent resources to reduce crime.
Staffing	Lower staffing levels coupled with large geographical areas of responsibility limits labor abilities.
Training	Limited funding also results in an inability for smaller agencies to train officers on sexual assault national best practices and the value of the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP).
Technology Implementation	Minimal training opportunities results in a lack of understanding of available technologies and how to apply such technologies to cold case investigations.
Access to Community-Based Resources	Access to victim services, including sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs), may require lengthy travel times to obtain services and may depend upon standard hospital services or SANE programs with restricted hours of operation.

The challenges outlined are not all inclusive and may not represent the experiences of all small and/or rural agencies. Although these challenges are significant, a possible solution may include partnering and collaborating with a statewide SAKI site to have access to resources provided by their award.

Statewide SAKI Resources are Available for Small Agencies

Establishing collaborative working relationships with small and rural agencies is crucial to the success of a statewide SAKI program seeking to identify gaps in victim services, address agency needs, and support sustainable practices for sexual assault response reform throughout the state. The following considerations are being presented to promote effective collaboration between statewide sites and small and/or rural jurisdictions:

- ◆ **Cultivate buy-in.** It is recommended the statewide site develop a comprehensive outreach strategy aimed at establishing rapport with small and/or rural agencies and ensuring they understand the resources available to them through the SAKI program

Outreach Strategy Considerations

1. Engage small and/or rural agencies through formal *on-site* and *in-person* meetings (if possible).
2. Be respectful of the chain of command. Include supervisory staff in these discussions along with investigators.
3. Be prepared to explain the purpose of the SAKI program and discuss resources available to the small/rural agency, including the ability to provide extra bodies to do the work (i.e., searching through property rooms to inventory SAKs or scanning old reports in preparation for case file review).
4. Collaborate with champion groups or organizations such as local/regional Sexual Assault Response Teams and police and sheriff associations to engage and support small and/or rural agencies.
5. Leverage statewide or regional training opportunities to share information about the SAKI program and to discuss resources available to jurisdictions through the statewide site.

- ◆ **Consider resources needed to identify unsubmitted SAKs.** Statewide sites are required to complete an inventory of unsubmitted SAKs across all jurisdictions within the state. To accomplish this, statewide sites should access the capacity of small and/or rural agencies to complete an inventory of unsubmitted SAKs. Training and additional resources may be needed to support these agencies in identifying all unsubmitted SAKs within their jurisdictions, completing the inventory and implementing a case management tracking system to prevent a future backlog.

- ◆ **Establish an inclusive SAK testing plan.** The statewide site is responsible for coordinating with the forensic laboratory to test all inventoried unsubmitted SAKs identified throughout the state. In developing a SAK testing plan, the statewide site should consider the capacity of small/rural agencies to participate in the submission process and should collaborate with them to determine what resources are needed to ensure SAKs are submitted for testing.
- ◆ **Establish CODIS hit follow-up policies.** Statewide sites must ensure that CODIS hit follow-up policies are enhanced with the needed resources to ensure small/rural agencies can effectively follow up on CODIS hits in a timely manner. If it is decided that the statewide site will support the smaller jurisdiction with CODIS hit follow-up investigations, Memorandums of Understanding may be needed to ensure effective information sharing between the forensic laboratory, the statewide site, and the small/rural agency. If a statewide site does not have direct access to the CODIS hit information required for the SAKI performance metric tool (PMT), a process must exist for the small/rural agency to provide the required data.

The CODIS hit follow-up policy should highlight:

1. Who will receive CODIS hits.
2. How the information will be shared.
3. Who is responsible for following up on the investigative lead.

- ◆ **Consider investigative capacity.** Statewide sites should determine if and how they will support a small and/or rural agency with investigative follow-up based on the agency's resources and capacity to conduct a thorough investigation. Statewide sites should recognize that guidance may be needed to help agencies evaluate cases for re-investigation. Regardless of investigative viability, statewide sites should gauge the ability of an agency to enter criteria cases into ViCAP and help enter cases as requested.
- ◆ **Provide victim support service strategies.** Access to victim services may be limited in small and rural regions, hindering immediate advocacy support for victims. Statewide sites should create strategies to support victim services enhancement, including expansion of SANE programs and trauma-informed victim engagement policies.

Statewide sites should be aware of additional funding opportunities for small/rural agencies to support victim services through the [Office on Violence Against Women \(OVW\)](#) or the [Office for Victims of Crime \(OVC\)](#).

- ◆ **Provide training.** Understanding small and rural jurisdictions often have limited opportunities for training, statewide sites should be prepared to provide effective training on trauma-informed, victim-centered practices to best support sexual assault survivors and must understand that a comprehensive and continuous training regimen for all personnel, regardless of levels of experience, is critical to an agency's response to sexual assault. Statewide sites should be able to provide targeted training to encourage trauma-informed, victim-centered investigations and prosecutions and offer opportunities for discipline-specific and multidisciplinary team training.³ Trainings on relevant national databases such as CODIS and ViCAP may also be beneficial to small and rural agencies. Statewide sites need to be cognizant of the fact that small/rural agencies may have limited capacity to send staff to trainings and should consider bringing the training to the agency or region.
- ◆ **Be a good listener.** Understanding a small and/or rural agency's needs allows statewide sites to incorporate those needs into future program planning.
- ◆ **Acknowledge alternative support strategies.** While partnering with a statewide site can be of benefit, there are additional strategies small and rural agencies may implement to optimize SAKI resources. Statewide sites should ensure these agencies are aware of funding opportunities through Purpose Area 2 of the SAKI program⁴ and are informed of how obtaining their own awards can complement the work being done through the statewide site. For example, a statewide site may support the inventory and testing of SAKs, while an agency's own funding could be used for CODIS hit follow-up and enhancement of local victim services.

³ RTI SAKI TTA Team (2018). *Statewide sexual assault response reform in SAKI workbook*. Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice

⁴ Bureau of Justice Assistance (2022). *National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI): Overview*. Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/saki/overview>

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Conclusion

Small and rural jurisdictions face unique challenges that may hinder an agency's ability to implement a sustainable approach to sexual assault response reform. The SAKI program provides support in overcoming these obstacles by encouraging statewide sites to develop collaborative working relationships with small and rural agencies. A statewide SAKI site has the means and opportunity to support growth and sustainability in small and rural areas by bringing resources, expertise, and collaboration to these often-underserved locations. By engaging in a collaborative working relationship, small and rural agencies are able to improve their current response to sexual assault, obtain justice for survivors, and enhance overall public safety.

For additional information on the implementation of sexual assault response reform for small and rural agencies, please visit <https://sakitta.org/>.

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