

Victim Advocates and Law Enforcement: A Critical Partnership for Victim Support and Healing

The information in this brief applies to cold case sexual assaults as well as current case sexual assaults. Mentions of sexual assault apply to both types of sexual assault cases.

Together, victim advocates and law enforcement play a pivotal part in establishing and sustaining victim engagement throughout the criminal justice process. Victim advocates serve sexual assault victims in ways that help maintain their engagement with the criminal justice system and support their path to recovery. Victim advocates have several roles to provide strong support to sexual assault survivors, including

- ◆ liaising between victims and law enforcement,
- ◆ explaining to victims that law enforcement is working on victims' behalf to bring perpetrators to justice, and
- ◆ partnering with law enforcement to establish trust and rapport with victims.

This brief offers insight about steps that you, as a victim advocate, can take to facilitate positive interactions between law enforcement and sexual assault victims.

Partnering to Help Victims

When partnering on sexual assault cases, victim advocates and law enforcement work in different capacities to accomplish the same mission. A successful partnership involves an understanding of each partner's roles, including how each profession's expertise and training provide holistic support to sexual assault victims.

The trust between victim advocates and law enforcement can be foundational to building trust with a victim. As a victim advocate, you have the experience and knowledge to assist in encouraging and/or re-establishing this relationship by working with a victim through their possible hesitation or resistance to collaborate with law enforcement. Although the process may take time, a victim's trust and partnership with law enforcement can be vital to a successful case and to the victim's healing process.

Disseminating Knowledge Through Training

Training for law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim advocates is essential to effectively support sexual assault victims. Although law enforcement may not have previously had a clear understanding of the trauma of sexual assault or the benefits of working with victim advocates, in-depth trainings on recognizing the impacts of trauma are enabling law enforcement to implement victim-centered approaches that better support sexual assault victims' healing and justice.

Similarly, specialized training for victim advocates in sexual assault, trauma, case management, crisis intervention, mental health, and victims' rights strengthens advocates' ability to integrate best practices when collaborating with law enforcement. When working in tandem, law enforcement and victim advocates can break down potential barriers to help build trust and rapport with victims. These partnerships between victim advocates and law enforcement can also be strengthened through cross-disciplinary trainings (i.e., victim advocates train law enforcement and vice versa) that encourage a better understanding of how each can work together to support victims.

Fostering Positive Communication

Messaging and the method of communication used for engagement can make all the difference when working with victims of sexual assault. Many victims may have a difficult time processing the information that is shared with them, and victim-centered responses that soften the tone of messages may be critical to these communications.

Before meeting with a victim, work with your law enforcement partner to develop a communication and safety plan. This plan should outline what information each of you will share with the victim, as well as how you will explain the separate roles and responsibilities of each team member to ensure that the victim understands the

partnership. The plan can also help identify safety issues that should be discussed with the victim and communicate to the victim that their safety is important to you.

Victim advocates can take an active role in maintaining positive and engaged communication between victims and law enforcement by considering the following points.

Finding the right words to discuss some of these topics with victims may be difficult; for that reason, the Suggested Communication sections include proposed wording to help you convey the proper message when talking with victims.

- ◆ Ensure that the victim understands the information provided by law enforcement and encourage the victim to ask questions of you and/or law enforcement.

Suggested Communication: *“We’ve covered a lot of information, and I want to make sure you’re not overwhelmed before we move on. What questions do you have for me or Officer [Name]?”*

- ◆ Remind the victim that law enforcement wants to provide a chance to regain focus on the sexual assault case and does not want to cause additional stress.

Suggested Communication: *“Officer [Name] and I are partnering together to work on your case and support you during this difficult time. We understand that some questions could be difficult, and we are here for you during this process.”*

- ◆ Ensure that the communication moves at the victim’s pace during interviews and conversations.

- Acknowledge any signs of trauma the victim may show.

Suggested Communication: *“You seem upset. Do you want to pause for a minute to discuss how you’re feeling? We want to move at your pace based on your comfort level. Is there anything we can do to help you?”*

- Recommend taking a break if the victim is hesitant or is having a difficult time discussing certain information.

Suggested Communication: *“We know this is hard to talk about. Would you like to take a break before we move on?”*

- Work with law enforcement to allow the victim to process and gather their thoughts.

Suggested Communication: *“We’ve discussed a lot of information. Officer [Name] and I want to give you enough time to process all of this. We will both be here for you after this conversation to help answer questions.”*

- ◆ Be mindful of the victim’s communication preferences, especially as they relate to case updates.
 - Understand what updates the victim does and does not want to receive about their case. Explain that you and law enforcement will be engaging the victim for different reasons. Law enforcement might need additional details and want to share updates with the victim. Your role in maintaining victim engagement through the criminal justice process is important to ensure the victim’s health.
 - Appreciate that some victims may not want to receive any updates about their case; reassure the victim that this is okay.

Suggested Communication: *“Officer [Name] and I will be in regular contact throughout the investigation. We can relay as many or as few updates as you’d like based on how involved you’d like to be. These updates aren’t meant to upset you or cause additional stress, so let’s discuss how you’d like to be kept informed about the progress of your case.”*

Suggested Communication: *“Updates about your case are meant to keep you informed and involved; they are not meant to stress you out or worry you. It’s completely okay if you don’t want to know about updates to your case. Officer [Name] and I want to respect your boundaries and do what is best for you.”*

Overcoming Potential Barriers

Victim advocates can help law enforcement build a positive relationship with a victim. Helping to break down communication barriers is necessary to progressing the case and giving victims a path to recovery.

Understanding cultural differences and how those cultural differences may affect interactions with certain victims can provide insight into the level of engagement required. Past experiences, personal or cultural beliefs, and the victim’s support network may affect how engaged they will be in the process. Individualizing each case to be adaptive to various situations can help to establish a unique rapport that breaks down preconceived barriers.

Victim advocates can assist with reducing a victim’s fears or anxiety by explaining law enforcement’s role in the criminal justice process. Demonstrating your trust in, and teamwork with, law enforcement encourages a victim to develop rapport with the officer and helps the victim understand that the law enforcement officer is there to support them.

Providing Resources

Victim advocates have access to numerous community resources that may benefit victims, including information about counseling, shelters, mental health, and substance abuse treatment. These resources can be shared with a victim by (a) talking with them individually or (b) having a law enforcement officer provide these resources on your behalf. If a law enforcement officer will be meeting with a victim, give the officer a resource manual to share with the victim. Law enforcement officers need to understand the available resources to address the victim's immediate concerns, thus fostering relationship building with the victim. Offering access to relevant resources allows the victim to see that there is a genuine unity between professionals who want to help promote healing and closure.

Making It All Work

Victims who know that everyone assigned to their case is part of a team that is working diligently to bring them justice ensures a stronger support system and improved recovery. Working together may not always be easy; however, the success of the case relies heavily on a successful partnership. Consistent, open communication among advocates, law enforcement, and victims can nurture trust and sustain rapport with everyone involved.

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