



Chapter 11

Development of a Community Task Force on Sexual Assault

In this chapter, you will find information on...

- *Developing an Inclusive Task Force*
- *Responsibilities of Members*
- *Development of Protocol*

The Benefits of a Community Task Force

Rape crisis programs, law enforcement agencies, prosecutor's offices, hospitals, mental health agencies, and schools are among the many organizations that need to work together to assist sexual assault survivors. Although each group has a different mission, it is most beneficial to survivors when these groups work collaboratively. There are a number of models of coordinated response to sexual assault. This chapter focuses on a community task force that holds interagency meetings on sexual assault cases, has interagency agreements in place, and has developed protocols for coordination and cross-training.

In some New York State counties, interagency coordination is publicly funded, and cross-training sessions and community task force meetings are scheduled at regular intervals. In other places, cross-training and information exchange is ad hoc and informal, organized as the need arises or as new staff requires training. However, there are many benefits in formalizing patterns of coordination in a community task force, to

provide a mechanism for ensuring improved ongoing services. The community task force then provides a structure to facilitate many other forms of community coordination to address sexual assault.

Benefits of a Community Task Force on Sexual Assault to Participating Agencies

A coordinated community response to sexual assault opens the doors of communication among agencies. All members of a community task force on sexual assault can educate each other about their agencies' missions and strategies for eradicating sexual assault.

Community task force participation helps rape crisis programs and criminal justice agencies (to improve relationships and provide a forum to address like issues), develop protocols, share trainings, and revise policies. Such interactions improve community collaboration. The members of the task force can identify common agendas and can work together to encourage local and state policy makers to make changes beneficial to sexual assault survivors.

Increased community collaboration allows each member of the community task force to discover what resources its own agency needs, to work effectively with sexual assault survivors. For example, prosecutors may learn that, no matter how much support rape crisis program legal advocates provide, the district attorney's office itself also needs to form a bond with the survivor by establishing trust, meeting with the survivor several times to discuss the case and prepare her to testify, and demonstrating sensitivity to the emotional impact that the prosecution and trial may have. When community task Force members come together, they can also offer support to each other when they face discouraging cases or frustration with the system.

A coordinated community response helps to protect and empower sexual assault victims making clear to all involved in the collaborative approach the full range of options which will assist survivor recovery. For example, all agencies need to be aware that no-contact orders have proven helpful in protecting survivors who know their offenders. Rape crisis programs and prosecution can work to support a victim in drafting a victim's impact statement, which can be a useful tool for the prosecution at sentencing, as well as being an empowering experience for the sexual assault survivor.

Survivor participation in every step of the legal process is the explicit goal of a coordinated community task force. Cross-training allows health care professionals to learn the evidentiary issues prosecutors face; law enforcement officers and prosecutors to learn about common reactions to trauma; and legal advocates to learn more about the criminal justice system, so that they can better help survivors prepare for court.

A coordinated response to sexual assault not only alters the survivor's perception of the systems, but the systems' perception of the survivor. Victims' rights legislation has challenged criminal justice professionals to rethink their conceptualization of the survivor as merely a witness in their case. Some criminal justice agencies have developed their own victim/witness assistance programs. These agencies realize that it requires different skills to work as victim advocates from those needed by police officers, investigators and prosecutors.

The Benefits of Coordinated Survivor-Centered Care

The community task force can provide continuity of care and sensitive, expert services for survivors of sexual assault. This requires coordinated participation and action on the part of all the service providers in a community. Continuity of care also means that each survivor is treated as a whole person by every service provider she encounters, and that all aspects of treatment and procedures are coordinated to provide the best overall health care, social and legal services possible. Each agency needs to work with all the others to produce a well organized system, so that no survivor gets lost in the shuffle between agencies and units.¹

A survivor-centered response recognizes and supports sexual assault survivors' need to assume control over their lives after an assault. A coordinated community task force on sexual assault will also ensure:

- Prompt and thorough investigation of cases;
- Timely apprehension and aggressive prosecution of offenders;
- Survivors being well informed of the status of their legal cases;
- Survivors' opinions are elicited and respected throughout prosecution and sentencing.²

A community response to sexual assault results in improved treatment of sexual assault survivors. The support available from rape crisis programs, law enforcement, and mental health programs can improve the response to the needs of individual survivors. Survivors will then not be dependent only upon the services of a single agency, but will be able to draw upon the collective resources of several agencies. A coordinated community task force can provide a way to involve programs that assist traditionally under-served, miss-served, or un-served groups. The task force can help coordinate needs for interpreters and multicultural services for sexual assault survivors.

In creating a survivor-centered response to sexual assault, a community task force can work to find innovative ways to meet survivor needs within the constraints of the criminal justice system. For example, survivors of sexual assault may have serious concerns about their personal safety when their perpetrators are free in the community, even if no-contact orders have been issued. In most communities, it is not financially feasible for the police department to assign personal bodyguards to every survivor. However it may be possible to place the survivor's neighborhood on an extra patrol listing, conducted as time and resources allow. Contact the law enforcement member of the task force for procedure.

The creation of a survivor-centered community task force will also communicate a commitment to treating sexual assault victims with respect. Survivors' concerns about public disclosure or about further traumatization by the criminal justice system will hopefully diminish over time.

Developing an Inclusive Task Force

Members of the Community Task Force on Sexual Assault

In order to have an effective community task force on sexual assault, representation from a number of agencies is critical. Rape crisis program legal advocates should explore including the following groups and individuals in organizing a task force:

- Survivors
- Additional rape crisis program staff who provide other survivor services
- Law enforcement
- Prosecution
- Court personnel
- Organizations which provide leadership and outreach in communities which are under-served, miss-served, or un-served or have been alienated from the criminal justice system
- Hospitals or other health care facilities (and related HMOs)
- Other victim service agencies
- Mental health agencies
- Drug/alcohol treatment agencies
- Children's services
- Educators/other school-based personnel leaders of faith communities

Because each community is different in its matrix of services, the composition of the task force needs to reflect the distinctiveness of the community. However, it is important to include as many of these types of agencies as possible in order to develop a comprehensive plan which will respond to the survivor in a holistic manner.

The legal advocate will find it helpful to discuss the underlying premises for creating a community task force with all prospective members:

1. Sexual assault is a pervasive problem, and each community has a responsibility to support survivors and combat the problem, protecting everyone from future sexual assault.
2. A coordinated community response reduces problems that arise from duplication of services, provides a full range of services, eliminates situations where survivors drop out or are lost in the system, and creates public confidence and trust in community agencies.
3. All agencies will benefit from changes to promote excellent care and continuity for sexual assault survivors.

These three understandings are essential because they emphasize the value of a coordinated community response. In order to transform the criminal justice system's response to sexual assault, sexual violence must be recognized as a concern for everyone living in the community. Without recognition of the scope of the problem, belief that integrated solutions is necessary, and understanding that change is valuable, successful community task force development is unlikely to occur.

Responsibilities of Members of the Community Task Force on Sexual Assault

The community task force should be responsible for the following:

- Assessing the community's needs as related to sexual assault
- Developing consensus concerning each agency's respective role in responding to the identified needs
- Formulating protocol reflecting the consensus
- Negotiating interagency agreements, and formalizing cooperative relationships and responsibilities embodied in written protocol

- Conducting training and technical assistance for agency personnel involved with sexual assault survivors
- Monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting the protocols which govern the interactions of the community task force with sexual assault survivors.

The roles of agencies participating on the community task force may on first glance seem self explanatory. For example, law enforcement investigates and arrest; prosecutors prepare cases and prosecute; health care personnel examine and treat victims and are responsible for forensic evidence collection; and rape crisis program's legal advocates offer support in navigating the criminal justice system and other services such as referrals for counseling. However, what is creative about a community task force is that in this multi-disciplinary context, these roles can be redefined over time to ensure that survivors are offered a seamless web of assistance.

At the same time, every participating member of the task force needs to fulfill their agencies' basic responsibilities, and not attempt to do the work of other organizations. Regular meetings of the task force provide a forum for defining the roles of each participating organization and establishing protocol where there is overlap.³

Development of Protocol

Protocol for a Survivor-Centered Response

The legal advocate will find it helpful to encourage the community task force to develop protocols to coordinate their roles. For the purpose of this manual, the word *protocol* is used to mean: *The product of negotiations in which agreements are made and documented, to create guidelines and assign roles and responsibilities for community task force participants, in order to provide a survivor-centered response to sexual assault.*

While drafting a protocol, the community task force should keep the needs of sexual assault survivors central to their planning:

- Discuss information, concerns and needs of survivors and how best to address them
- Determine what case-specific information can and cannot be shared with each other and with survivors
- Determine who should be responsible for providing information to survivors
- Determine how to provide ongoing information and keep survivors informed throughout the criminal justice process (e.g., notifying survivors of additional processes such as photo arrays, police line-ups for suspect identification, additional information, or statements that may be required)
- Determine how to alleviate survivors' fears about safety (giving survivors an opportunity to discuss these fears and specific steps they can take if harassed by their offenders)

In order for protocol to be survivor-centered, the goal must be increased attention to the needs of sexual assault survivors and their involvement in the decisions affecting them, the investigation, the prosecution and the case disposition.⁴

It may be agreed that the rape crisis program legal advocate will be the primary task force member whose responsibility is to keep the survivor informed of the status of her case.

Benefits of Community Participation in Protocol Development

The goal of protocol is to increase the sexual assault survivors' satisfaction with the performance of the system, while simultaneously improving performance based upon traditional measurements, such as conviction rates and length of time it takes to move the case from disclosure to disposition.

Effective protocol development requires effort by everyone on the community task force. Many jurisdictions have developed protocol for specific disciplines or have some sort of protocol in place for sexual assault cases. Reviewing any existing protocol is always a good starting point to establish what existing procedures are being implemented. Once current protocols are reviewed and assessed, additional protocol development steps will often be needed to incorporate a multi-agency approach. Some of the responsibilities for addressing sexual assault in the community are indisputable--such as those established by statute. Relevant statutes should be reviewed, discussed, and clarified by the task force to ensure that communities are in compliance, and that all parties understand their appropriate roles.

Negotiation is required in those areas where agency responsibilities are less clear. New relationships need to be established for those agencies who have never worked together before. Guidelines to address information sharing between victim service providers and prosecutors or law enforcement should be discussed and developed. The idea of sharing information with non-criminal justice agencies may be unconventional for some law enforcement agencies. However, if victim services providers are to assist in facilitating communication between law enforcement agencies and sexual assault survivors, information sharing is necessary. On the other hand, rape crisis program legal advocates need to have clear guidance concerning the information that may be shared with survivors and need to respect the boundaries established by the community task force.

Members of the task force should understand that the protocol development process will be greatly assisted by an initial community needs assessment. Consensus about the community's needs will facilitate the negotiations about responsibilities and expedite agreements about how to coordinate responses.

Protocol developed by the community task force should utilize terminology that can be understood by all of the participating agencies. One of the complicating factors with multi-disciplinary efforts is that each discipline has developed its own "language." The

protocol should recognize and overcome these language differences. Any terms which may have different meanings when used by different agencies should be operationally defined for the protocol. For example, “case” may have different meanings for each participating member of the community task force. For law enforcement, “case” may mean a collection of related crimes consolidated into one investigation; for prosecution, it may mean one trial; and for rape crisis programs, it may mean one survivor. If used in the protocol for the community task force, “case” needs to be defined so that all participants have a common understanding of its use in that context.

Sexual violence is understood differently by individual agencies. The community task force should seek to provide the broadest possible range of sexual behaviors that are included in abuse, assault, forcible touching, harassment that constitutes sexual violence. The definition should incorporate the following elements: gender neutrality, specification of proscribed acts, protection of the individual’s right of choice, and preservation of privacy and confidentiality needs of survivors. For example, limiting the definition of sexual assault to being synonymous with rape would reflect a narrow focus that would not adequately meet the needs of survivors of other sex crimes such as sexual misconduct, child sexual abuse or forcible touching.

The key issue for the community task force is to create a definition of sexual assault which acknowledges both the needs of victims and the legal requirements of the jurisdiction. Traditional definitions of crime identify proscribed behaviors which, when committed, lead to prescribed sentences. The emphasis is on the act and on the offender, a systems-centered response. The task force cannot change this aspect of criminal law; however, it can link what happens to the survivor with appropriate survivor-centered responses by the criminal justice system and victim service programs.

Protocol developed by the community task force should establish guidelines for each of the participating agencies’ response to sexual assaults and sexual assault survivors. Each guideline should have stated objectives so that the individuals using it understand

its intent and are able to apply the guideline in spirit as well as substance.

The guidelines establish the parameters for the activity including:

- Which agencies are responsible;
- What they are responsible for;
- When they are responsible; and
- How the activity is to be carried out.

These guidelines are the basis for developing expectations among the participating agencies on the community task force, and for understanding how the multi-disciplinary, survivor-centered system operates. An interdisciplinary dependency needs to exist in sexual assault investigations. The protocols developed by the community task force formally identify such inter-disciplinary dependencies and assign specific responsibilities for each agency's role in the context of a cooperative system.

The development of protocol for the community task force needs to be an ongoing process. Once the initial protocol has been developed, there may be a tendency to give a collective sigh of relief and relegate the protocol to the bookshelf. It is important to resist that temptation. Developments in criminology, health sciences, legislation, and survivor services dictate the need for a constantly evolving protocol, maintaining its legal, therapeutic, and scientific relevance.

*This section has been adapted from **Looking Back, Moving Forward: A Guidebook for Communities Responding to Sexual Assault**, National Victim Center, 1993.*

¹ National Victim Center. (1993). Looking Back, Moving Forward: A Guidebook for Communities

² National Institute of Justice. (1994). The criminal justice and community response to rape.

³ National Victim Center (1993). Looking Back, Moving Forward: A Guidebook for Communities Responding to Sexual Assault.

⁴ *Ibid.*