



## NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

# FORMING AN ACTION-RESEARCH TEAM TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES

JANUARY 2016 LESSONS LEARNED: SEXUAL ASSAULT KITS



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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

FORMING AN  
**ACTION-RESEARCH TEAM**  
TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES



Like other jurisdictions around the country, Detroit faced the issue of large numbers of sexual assault kits (SAKs) that had not, over the years, been submitted to a crime lab for DNA testing. The action-research project that NIJ funded in 2011 required the Wayne County (Detroit), Mich., Prosecutor's Office to form a multidisciplinary team to address the issue. On the team were practitioners who deal with sexual assaults every day — police officers, crime lab analysts, prosecutors and victim advocates — as well as social science researchers from Michigan State University (MSU).

The MSU researchers were led by Rebecca Campbell, Ph.D., a nationally recognized expert on sexual assault. Dr. Campbell's work with the Detroit multidisciplinary team followed an "action-research" model. First, the team worked collaboratively to understand the scope of the issue: How many unsubmitted kits were there, and how and why did the problem develop? Then, the team identified effective, sustainable responses. (See sidebar, p. 5, "What Is Action Research?")

Here — derived from the final report on the project, prepared by Dr. Campbell on behalf of the Detroit SAK multidisciplinary team — are eight lessons learned about forming a team to conduct action research on a large number of SAKs that had previously not been submitted to a crime laboratory for DNA testing.

In 2011, after a competitive selection process, the National Institute of Justice awarded grants to the Wayne County (Detroit), Mich., Prosecutor's Office and to the Houston Police Department to look at the issue of sexual assault kits (SAKs) that had not previously been sent to a crime laboratory for DNA testing.

The overarching goal of this project was to identify effective, sustainable responses regarding previously untested SAKs.

This brochure — one in a series of four is derived from lessons learned during the project in Detroit. We hope that the brochures assist other jurisdictions that are addressing the issue of previously untested SAKs.

## **1 The cause needs a champion (or champions).**

Addressing the problem of unsubmitted SAKs is a long and arduous process, and individuals and organizations may feel internal and external pressure to solve the problem as quickly as possible. Confronting, resolving and preventing current and future accumulations of unsubmitted SAKs is a long-term endeavor — a cause that needs a champion or many champions. Leaders with good standing and respect within the community need to take on the issue and keep key organizations and systems engaged in solving the problem.

## **2 Forming a multidisciplinary team is important, but *building* a team is even more important.**

Forming a multidisciplinary team (or working group) is essential; however, it may not be reasonable to expect that individuals on the team — or the organizations they represent — will have the experience or interest in working together, at first. The results of the Detroit action-research project revealed that years of poor systemic collaboration can contribute to the accumulation of a large number of unsubmitted SAKs. Therefore, allocating time to learn about the roles of each team member and the work of their organizations is critical. Team-building activities — particularly at the beginning of the project — can also help the group to coalesce and work together more effectively.

## **3 A project coordinator is essential to the success of the project.**

Previous action-research projects have shown that a designated project coordinator is critical to the success of the project. This person is responsible for keeping the group on task, providing day-to-day leadership, managing conflict and interpersonal difficulties, and sustaining team collaboration.

## 4 Group facilitation has its challenges.

Group facilitation is challenging work, and a multidisciplinary team may need to try different strategies before finding one that works. Managing stakeholders with divergent viewpoints can be difficult, but a skilled group facilitator can create a setting in which individuals are able to openly share their points of view.

## 5 Who has decision-making authority?

The individuals on the multidisciplinary team may or may not have the authority to make decisions on behalf of their organizations. As a result, a team's provisional decisions may not be enacted immediately, and senior executives will need time to consider the team's recommendations. If the senior executives do not concur with the team's decisions — or decide not to adopt their recommendations — the team may need to re-evaluate and resubmit its plan of action.

In a multidisciplinary team consisting of multiple organizations, some organizations may be more influential than others. One organization may have been granted more authority than others, either by law or by the community. The multidisciplinary team should specifically discuss these issues to clarify what decisions individual members can make and which of the team's decisions are binding or are merely advisory.

## Group Facilitator Options

Here are a few roles that the group facilitator in an action research project can play:

- The project coordinator.\*
- An outside, professional facilitator who is not affiliated with any of the member organizations.
- A team member who is not the project coordinator.\*

*\*If the multidisciplinary team meetings are facilitated by someone inside the group, the group needs to consider whether and how the facilitator can share his or her own views in the discussion without biasing the process.*

## **6 Balancing the workload: New cases don't stop coming in.**

Communities that have large numbers of unsubmitted SAKs are likely to struggle with how to handle the old cases (many of which will become “current cases” if they are re-opened, investigated and prosecuted) while also responding to new incoming cases. All disciplines — prosecution, law enforcement, forensic sciences, medicine and nursing, and advocacy — will face this challenge. Some jurisdictions may be able to form specialized cold case units, in which staff focus exclusively on the older cases and other units are responsible for the new incoming cases.

## **7 Prepare for change ... because change is constant.**

Because addressing the problem of unsubmitted SAKs is a long-term endeavor, staff turnover among the top leadership and front-line practitioners is to be expected. Other changes in funding, resources and community context should also be anticipated. Having champions from multiple disciplines can help weather these changes and keep the community invested in the development of long-term solutions.

## **8 The action-research model can be unclear to practitioners.**

Community practitioners may not have experience participating in social science action-research projects. And even if they do, they are more likely to have experienced “traditional” research or evaluation in which the researchers were focused primarily on data collection. As noted in the sidebar on page 5, the action-research model is a very different approach to research; thus, before they agree to participate, multidisciplinary partners should learn how the model works. Once a multidisciplinary team is involved in an action-research project, team members should continue to discuss roles and responsibilities because this process is important in developing appropriate expectations of the researchers and the other partners.

## What Is Action Research?

In the past 15 years, there has been a significant shift in how complex criminal justice problems are studied. Before “action research” came on the scene, academic researchers sat apart from the criminal justice practitioners, studying an issue from “the outside.” In action research, however, researchers work collaboratively with practitioners to:

1. Understand circumstances in their local context, diagnosing the nature and source of the problem.
2. Plan a response.
3. Implement the response.
4. Evaluate the response.
5. Modify the response, based on results of the evaluation.

In Detroit, Dr. Campbell and her action research team collected data on a small set of cases, brought the information back to the full multidisciplinary group, and said, ‘Here’s what seems to be working well and here are some things we should think more about.’

Action research allows practitioners to test new processes and solutions while researchers evaluate their progress and give feedback. In this way, the work of the team is continually revised and improved as new information becomes available — which helps ensure that decisions are made in a thoughtful, data driven way.

## Other Brochures in This Series

Notifying Sexual Assault Victims After Testing Evidence

Performing an Audit of Sexual Assault Evidence in Police Custody

Creating a Plan to Test a Large Number of Sexual Assault Kits

## For More Information

**See an interactive Web page on using evidence in sexual assault kits:**

<http://NIJ.gov/unsubmitted-kits/pages/default.aspx>

**Learn more about the Detroit project:** <https://www.NCJRS.gov> (keyword: 248680)

**Learn more about the Houston project:** <http://www.HoustonSAKResearch.org>

**Learn more about the issue of untested evidence in sexual assault cases:**

<http://www.NIJ.gov> (keyword: untested evidence in sexual assault cases)

Learn more about sexual assault investigations, including understanding the neurobiology of sexual assault and a partnership formed by NIJ and the FBI to help address the issue of unsubmitted evidence in sexual assault cases.

Visit [NIJ.gov](https://www.nij.gov), keyword: sexual assault investigations

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## Acknowledgments

One of the National Institute of Justice's requirements in the Detroit and Houston projects was that multidisciplinary teams had to be involved in every step along the way. We thank the team members for their extraordinary commitment to these projects and for their role in improving the administration of justice in the United States.

### **The Detroit team:**

- Michigan State University\*
- Wayne County Prosecutor's Office
- Detroit Police Department
- WC Safe
- YWCA Interim House
- Michigan State Police
- Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board
- Joyful Heart Foundation
- Michigan Prosecuting Attorneys Association

### **The Houston team:**

- Sam Houston State University
- The University of Texas at Austin
- Houston Forensic Science Center
- Houston Police Department
- Houston Area Women's Center
- Memorial Hermann Health System
- Harris Health System
- Harris County District Attorney's Office

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# SEXUAL ASSAULT KITS

Using Science to Find Solutions



## Explore how evidence in SAKs is used in solving sexual assault cases, including:

- Implications for victims.
- Why many kits historically were not tested.
- What policymakers and criminal justice professionals should know.



Visit [www.nij.gov/unsubmitted-kits](http://www.nij.gov/unsubmitted-kits) to learn more.

