

Media Considerations for SAKI Grantees

The Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) is a Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) program that assists jurisdictions in addressing unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs) and establishing sustainable practices for collecting and processing forensic evidence, investigating and prosecuting sexual assault cases, and supporting victims of sexual assault. This document presents effective strategies for jurisdictions to manage their relationship with the media and the public, including how best to promote positive steps being taken to address unsubmitted SAKs and sexual assault reform more generally.

Media outlets, nationally and locally, are among those most interested in SAKI and related efforts, and they report frequently on the status of unsubmitted rape kits in communities; policies and practices for sexual assault investigations; success stories; and recurring issues and frustrations. In fact, reporters have often been helpful in shedding light on the problem. State and local jurisdictions frequently receive questions from media outlets about their efforts and participation in SAKI.

Media Strategy: Key Practices

The SAKI Training and Technical Assistance team recommends the following key practices to establish or strengthen a media strategy about unsubmitted SAKs and effectively inform the community about your project. Also included is a list of existing resources available to support jurisdictions on this topic.

Establish a Point of Contact

Determine a point of contact to answer any questions from the media. Many police departments and district attorneys' offices already have public information officers who may serve this role. Given the scope of subject, your organization may choose to dedicate a person within your working group who is better informed on the issue and status of the project. Having a single point of contact makes it easier for the media to obtain information from your organization, and ensures that clear and consistent answers and messages are provided to all outlets. If you have a multidisciplinary working group with representation from several agencies, decide who will speak on behalf of the group. If agencies prefer to have their own point of contact, ensure that all contacts communicate a unified message about working group efforts.

Remain Transparent

Be clear and open with reporters and community members about SAKI and the efforts your organization is taking under the program. Share what information you can, including numbers of kits tested, CODIS matches, cases that are moving forward, etc. Be clear about the information you do not have access to or that you are not able to share, and why.

Be Proactive

Reach out to your local media and create relationships. Announce milestones and achievements made throughout the project; hold regular briefings with the media. This is a great way to promote your successes and to keep the community informed about the project. Suggested topics of announcements include when your inventory is complete, testing results, or notable arrests and convictions. The media also can be helpful in reaching victims that may want to have information about their case but do not know where to turn.

Protect the Victim

As with all open cases, maintain sensitivity about victim names, location of the crime, and case details. Even the smallest details in rural or small communities can threaten a victim's privacy. If victims are willing to speak publicly, do a safety check with them to protect them from possible retribution from the offender and the offender's friends and family. Make sure that victims who do want to speak out are aware of their rights to answer certain questions and not others, say no to any interview; and ask that their names not be used. Connect victims to local support systems that can help them deal with issues that may arise out of dealing with the media.

Be ready to address the WHY

One of the key questions many sites face is, “Why is there a backlog?” To address this question, we encourage you to look at research by Dr. Rebecca Campbell and reports from other jurisdictions that have addressed this issue. Their work communicates that untested and unsubmitted sexual assault kits built up in communities because of a system-wide breakdown. There is no reliable estimate for the number of SAKs that are unsubmitted or untested, but we do know that unsubmitted SAKs can be attributed to many complex factors including poor evidence tracking, outdated and ineffective investigation practices, gaps in knowledge about trauma and its impact on victim reactions and behavior post-assault, bias, and not believing victims, lack of resources and personnel, misunderstanding of crime laboratory acceptance policies, and a lack of understanding about the value of DNA, the DNA database and testing SAKs. Resolving these issues is critical to providing justice for victims and preventing such a backlog in the future. Reports, case studies, other materials are available on the SAKI website at www.sakitta.org.

Focus on creating a unified message that does not point fingers at the different departments and agencies within your community. Also, use this question as an opportunity to push the discussion forward and to communicate how the community, departments, and agencies are working to create a coordinated response to sexual assault and to prevent this from happening again.

Resources and Example Efforts

Here are some resources and examples of how other SAKI sites have developed positive media coverage and informed the public:

- ◆ **Release a public service announcement.** The Portland Police Bureau and Austin Police Department developed public service announcements to inform the community about their initiative and testing efforts.
 - View the [Portland Rose Project PSA](#).
 - View the [Austin Police Department PSA](#).
- ◆ **Set up a hotline.** Establish a phone line that survivors in your community can contact if they believe their sexual assault kit was not submitted for testing. Have procedures in place to respond to these calls.
 - The Duluth Police Department and their local rape crisis center established the “Betty Skye” hotline, named after a local community activist and survivor, where victims can call if they are unsure about the status of their case.
- ◆ **Develop a website to release project updates.** If you plan to regularly release updates on your inventory, testing, investigation, and prosecution efforts, develop a project website where members of your community and the media can access up to date information.
 - View [Wayne County’s Rape Kit Project Website](#).
- ◆ **Create and distribute community engagement materials.** Create brochures, palm cards, or fact sheets about your project to distribute to the community. Connect with community organizations and groups that are invested or impacted by the project, such as shelters or homeless advocacy groups.
 - For example materials, contact the SAKI Training and Technical Assistance Team.
- ◆ **Include the media in meetings.** If you have a good relationship with members of the media, it may be helpful to invite them to meetings and events to witness your efforts. Cuyahoga County included a media representative who had a deep understanding and investment in the issues in their working group meetings.

Through EndtheBacklog, the Joyful Heart Foundation has developed resources for reporters covering unsubmitted sexual assault kits: [Covering the Backlog: Resources for Reporters](#)

For more hands-on assistance developing a media or dissemination plan, contact the SAKI Training and Technical Assistance team via email sakitta@rti.org or call 1-800-957-6436.

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