



Improving Sexual Assault Investigations with Trauma-Informed, Victim-Centered Approaches in Brighton and Commerce City, Colorado

CNA

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IMPROVING SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATIONS WITH TRAUMA-INFORMED, VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACHES IN BRIGHTON AND COMMERCE CITY, COLORADO

INTRODUCTION

Providing timely, responsive, and high-quality victim services can interrupt a cycle of violence among a family, peer group, or community; reduce the risk of future victimization; encourage continued engagement throughout the investigation and prosecution and increase victim¹ and community trust in the justice process. As a result, United States Attorney's Offices (USAOs), law enforcement agencies, courts, and community organizations across the country are developing innovative strategies that reduce crime and support victims as they cope and recover from the trauma of violent crime.

Developed by the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC) and CNA's Center for Justice Research and Innovation, this brief is one in a series designed to highlight leading victim services efforts. This series of briefs aims to provide Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) teams with insight on innovative victim services efforts and the outcomes these efforts can achieve for agencies and individuals. Each brief will highlight an innovative program or initiative that a law enforcement agency implemented to improve their practices and responses to victims of violent crime.

This brief focuses on the development and operations of the Commerce City and Brighton, Colorado, Sexual Assault Task Force (SATF). Developed in 2018 to improve sexual assault investigation outcomes, the SATF uses trauma-informed approaches and victim-centered investigations to accomplish its goals. This case study describes the SATF's overall approach to investigating sexual assault crimes and highlights promising practices and lessons learned for PSN teams to consider. In addition, we specifically highlight the trauma-informed interview technique that the SATF uses to provide context for victim-centered investigations.

METHODOLOGY

To gather detailed information on the SATF and its key partners, CNA worked closely with the SATF to coordinate interviews with relevant personnel and key community stakeholders. We also requested materials related to SATF's work, including three years of annual reports. CNA used this information to develop this case study.

¹ Within this document, we use the term *victim* when referring to individuals who have experienced sexual violence. Although both the terms *victim* and *survivor* are appropriate, we based this decision on RAINN's recommendations relating to terminology.



The CNA team interviewed six current and former SATF law enforcement officers, three victim advocates, and five representatives of community partners (including representatives from the District Attorney’s Office, Ralston House, and the Adams County Division of Child and Family Services). These interviews focused on the background of the SATF, its daily operations, and lessons learned from its three years of existence.

BACKGROUND

Trauma-Informed Approaches

Trauma does not have a universal definition. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMSHA, 2014, p. 7; Menscher and Maul, 2016). Trauma can have very different effects on individuals. In some individuals, unaddressed trauma can lead to adverse behavioral and physical health conditions, including mental health issues—*anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress*—and even substance use, which can lead to contact with the criminal justice system. Research shows that children exposed to violence are at a higher risk of engaging in criminal behavior and of being victimized later in life, thus becoming part of an ongoing cycle of offending and violence.

Organizations use trauma-informed approaches to provide holistic services to meet the needs of the whole person. These approaches recognize that every person coming to services may have different needs, different life experiences, or different responses to trauma, and services must be nuanced and reflect these differences. The SAMSHA identifies four key concepts—“the Four “R’s”—that are necessary for trauma-informed approaches: have a **realization** that individuals respond to trauma in unique ways, **recognize** the signs of trauma, **respond** by incorporating trauma-informed practices across all aspects of the organization, and **resist re-traumatization** of the individual (SAMSHA, 2014).

“The Four “R’s” for trauma-informed approaches:

- Realization
- Recognize
- Respond
- Resist Re-traumatization (SAMSHA, 2014)

When discussing the effects of traumatic events, psychologists frequently refer to the neurobiology of trauma. For example, individuals who experience traumatic events often forget specific details or may be unable to recall events in chronological order. This is because traumatic events affect the functionality of the hippocampus (where the brain stores and recalls long-term memories) because the amygdala (the “fear center”) is activated (NSVRC, 2013). Essentially, the brain is working to protect individuals during traumatic events, which may cause them to have difficulty remembering specific details or the timing of events.



As many communities focus on improving victim support and reimagining policing, experts have called for increases in trauma-informed policing and, in particular, trauma-informed interviewing (Haime, 2020). Trauma-informed policing is often discussed as a means to combat racial profiling and address adverse childhood experiences (Laurencin, 2020; Gillespie-Smith, Brodie, Collins, Deacon, and Goodall, 2018). When thinking about trauma-informed policing, a useful definition is “a framework for police officers to recognize and appropriately address the complexities of trauma experienced by survivors . . . to acknowledge symptoms, and to use response tactics accordingly to prevent further individual trauma” (Laurencin, 2020, p. 591). During a recent Smart Policing Initiative (SPI) workshop, Captain Perri Johnson of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department described the basic tenants of trauma-informed policing as “shift[ing] the focus of law enforcement from asking ‘What is wrong with you?’ to ‘What happened to you?’” (SPI, 2019). This shift in thinking helps police officers and investigators focus not just on the crime being investigated but also on the physiological and emotional effects the crime may have had on the victim (Jones, 2020). Considering the effects of crime on victims leads to more victim-centered investigations and helps ensure that the emotional needs of victims are addressed. Trauma-informed policing can also lead to better case outcomes, greater victim satisfaction with the process, and improved community relationships.

Sexual Assault Victims and Law Enforcement

Sexual assault investigations are known to be difficult, and some members of law enforcement have not always believed victims of sexual assault (Campbell, Lapsey, and Wells, 2019; Rich, 2019). Research has shown that the criminal justice system can re-victimize sexual assault victims and increase their likelihood of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by requiring victims to relive their experiences, often in detail. Rape myths, which are prevalent throughout law enforcement agencies, are stereotypes of sexual assault and rape that lead to societal mistrust and general misperceptions of sexual assault and rape victims (e.g., that women frequently lie about rape) (Rich, 2019). Campbell et al. (2019) recently conducted a randomized controlled experiment evaluating police perceptions of sexual assault victims after receiving trauma-informed training. This study revealed that law enforcement members who received trauma-informed training had improved their “perceptions of victims and improved knowledge of laws and trauma-informed investigative practices”—including a reduction in believing rape myths (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 17).

As discussed above, trauma may affect a sexual assault or rape victim’s ability to recall the events in a linear (or chronological) fashion. For this reason, trauma-informed interviewing approaches can lead to victims recounting their experiences in a way that does not cause more stress and allows them to disclose their experiences in the way that works best for them. Trauma-informed interviewing allows the victim to tell their story the way they can—which may not be chronologically (Rich, 2019). Law enforcement officers are not always trained to conduct victim interviews in a trauma-informed manner, even though studies have shown that trauma informed interviewing may lead to increased case acceptance by local prosecutors (Rich, 2019). Trauma-informed interviewing training teaches law enforcement officers to view interviewing differently—to allow the victim to tell their story in their own way, at their chosen pace, and in a place they feel comfortable (Allen, 2019).



Commerce City and Brighton, Colorado

Commerce City and Brighton, Colorado are neighboring cities located mostly in Adams County, Colorado. Both cities are north of Denver, Colorado, and they share similar population densities and demographics. As of July 2019, Commerce City was home to over 60,000 individuals over an area of approximately 36 square miles.² Similarly, Brighton was home to more than 41,000 persons over approximately 21 square miles.³ Both cities contain a mixture of residential and commercial developments, with the county seat located in Brighton.

The Commerce City and Brighton Police Departments were uniquely positioned to create a joint task force because the departments have a history of collaboration. In addition to previous partnerships, the Victim Services Units of the two departments merged in 2014. After this merger, it became evident that both departments—Commerce City in particular—were struggling with sexual assault investigations. Reporting rates for sexual assault cases appeared to be declining, and case acceptance rates by the local prosecutors were also low. A review of sexual assault investigations throughout Adams County noted that Commerce City's sexual assault clearance rates were lower than the county averages. Additionally, interviewees noted that the departments received informal complaints about how they handled sexual assault cases. Interviewees indicated that a hesitancy about investigating sexual assault allegations existed within both departments, and officers tended to shy away from them.

In 2013, Brighton conducted an informal assessment of its sexual assault cases and made changes, including implementing new training and the You Have Options Program (YHOP). In May 2015, Commerce City underwent an audit of its sexual assault investigations to understand how the department was handling sexual assault cases.

As a result of the audit, the University of Colorado recommended that the Commerce City Police Department also implement the YHOP. The results of the audit and the informal assessment were similar: both departments were struggling to meet victim needs, cases were not being properly investigated, and there was an underlying sentiment of not believing victims. The idea of a joint task force emerged from internal conversations about these topics. The local area had already successfully implemented other task forces (e.g., drug task forces) through organizational collaboration. Once the idea took root, members of the police departments applied for federal funding to implement the task force.

"It became pretty evident, pretty quickly, that we were not living up to our obligations with sexual assaults."

- SATF Member

² <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/commercecitycolorado>

³ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/brightoncitycolorado>



You Have Options Program

YHOP was founded in 2010 by Detective Carrie Hull in Oregon (YHOP, 2021). During her time investigating sexual assault allegations, Detective Hull realized that traditional interviewing methods and investigating allegations were not serving the unique needs of sexual assault victims (YHOP, 2021). Working with local community partners, Detective Hull developed written options for sexual assault victims—options that allowed law enforcement responses to be more victim-centered. Although originally designed as a local program, after much interest, YHOP became a national program in 2014 and began offering trainings to law enforcement agencies around the country (YHOP, 2021).

YHOP prioritizes giving victim's choices by offering them access to victim advocates, police resources, and medical treatment regardless of whether they choose to identify their attacker and participate in an investigation (Jimmerson, 2017). YHOP also allows victims to reengage with law enforcement at a later point, even if they initially choose not to participate in an investigation. Overall, YHOP provides **20 Elements** to assist law enforcement in improving sexual assault investigations.⁴

Task Force Operations

The Commerce City and Brighton Police Departments recognized that they needed to improve their sexual assault investigations. Under the leadership of their victim services manager, the deputy chief from Commerce City, and the chiefs of both departments, they created the SATF in 2018 using a Smart Policing Initiative (SPI) grant.⁵ The SATF was designed to change the departments' approaches to sexual assault investigations by applying trauma-informed and victim-centered techniques to improve victim outcomes and sexual assault investigations. The SATF currently consists of the following personnel:

- Five detectives
- A sergeant who oversees the detectives
- An investigations commander from Commerce City (20 percent of this commander's time)
- The Brighton and Commerce City Police Department victim services manager
- A researcher
- Two victim advocates

⁴ These Elements range from how and when victim survivors can report sexual assaults (or choose to stop participating in an investigation) to how law enforcement officers should respond to victim survivors (where they should meet with victims, how to conduct interviews, etc.). For more information on YHOP's 20 Elements, see YHOP's [webpage](#).

⁵ At the time, *SPI* stood for "Strategies for Policing Innovation." The SPI is a Bureau of Justice Assistance program that supports law enforcement agencies in building evidence-based, data-driven law enforcement tactics and strategies that are effective, efficient, and economical. The goal of SPI is to improve policing performance and effectiveness based on scientific evidence, while containing costs.



The SATF is not a full multi-disciplinary team model, but it does serve to enhance collaboration, communication, align goals, while centering sexual assault victims in all aspects. The SATF meets weekly with community partners, including the 17th Judicial District Sexual Assault Response Team Coordinator, Ralston House, the District Attorney's Office, The Blue Bench, Reaching HOPE, St. Anthony's Hospital Forensic Nurse Examiner Program, and the Adams County Division of Child and Family Services. Ralston House provides services to victims of abuse in their community; however, their relationship to the SATF comes through child victims. Ralston House conducts forensic interviews for children (individuals under the age of 17) who may have been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused. In addition to forensically interviewing children, Ralston House also assists the SATF by interviewing adult victims with intellectual and mental disabilities. Reaching HOPE is a nonprofit organization providing mental health services to victims, both adult and child, of trauma. Community partners join the other members of the SATF in their weekly meetings to discuss ongoing investigations and to highlight certain cases. The SATF handles all felony sexual assaults, and, in limited circumstances, misdemeanor sexual assault crimes within their respective jurisdictions. Since its inception, the SATF has investigated over 700 sexual assault cases and assisted over 1,200 sexual assault victims (SATF, 2020). The SATF's overall goals are to:

- "Increase the efficacy of sexual assault investigations through training and adherence to best practice in sexual assault investigations."
- "Develop a team of specialized detectives who demonstrate a strong understanding of the dynamics of sexual assault, offender behaviors, and survivor healing needs."
- "Better serve survivors of sexual assault through a strong integrated victim services model and increased training for all SATF members on the neurobiology of trauma."
- "Build strong community collaborations to ensure survivors are receiving the support they need to maintain involvement in the investigation, if they so desire."

The SATF is committed to practicing trauma-informed policing and to conducting sexual assault investigations in a victim-centered manner. When the Commerce City and Brighton Police Departments began implementing the SATF, they had to recruit SATF detectives. The initial round of hiring included competitive testing processes and panel interviews. Those involved in recruiting emphasized the importance of hiring the right individuals for the SATF. Our interviewees indicated that, because sexual assault investigations can be taxing on detectives, recruiters focused on hiring individuals who *wanted* to be part of the task force. The reasons for wanting to join the task force varied—some detectives saw the task force as an opportunity to advance while others were passionate about working on sexual assault cases—but the desire to be part of the SATF was seen as an important quality.

To ensure that members of the SATF treat victims with dignity, the SATF pursued **Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI®) certification**. The SATF chose FETI® certification specifically because it integrates with YHOP. FETI® is "a science- and practice-based interviewing methodology informed by the latest research on the neurobiology of trauma and memory."⁶

⁶ <https://www.certifiedfeti.com/about/>



FETI® methodology provides instruction on:

- The importance of understanding your role during an interview.
- How and why you should separate the interview from the investigation.
- The potential effects of trauma and stress on memory and recall.
- Empathic Listening.™
- Unidirectional Interviewing.™
- Experiential Information Collection.™
- Strategies to increase neutrality and equity.
- Best practices for accurately documenting the interview.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Our interviews for this case study revealed several promising ways that the SATF currently integrates trauma-informed policing into sexual assault investigations. Law enforcement agencies looking to improve their trauma-informed policing, partner with neighboring agencies or improve sexual assault investigations could benefit from the promising practices discussed below.

Implement trauma-informed policing training

Every SATF detective, victim advocate, and leader has received FETI® training, which is also incorporated into the YHOP certification process. The training to achieve basic FETI® certification consists of three parts:

- A two-day training (online and in-person) on the FETI® framework and interview process;
- A three-day (online and in-person) practical training on the FETI® interviewing process; and
- Interview evaluations (two interviews submitted within 60 days) and an exam that tests the participant's knowledge of the FETI® framework.

Some patrol officers receive a less-intensive online FETI® training while others are trained on how to incorporate the elements of YHOP. Ensuring patrol officers receive trauma training is important for the SATF model, since patrol officers are typically the first to respond to a call for service. Once a patrol officer responds, they typically conduct an initial interview with the victim before speaking with their patrol sergeant, SATF sergeant, and, finally, SATF detective.



Interviewees emphasized that trauma-informed policing is victim-centered. Instead of typical investigations and interviews that focus on specific facts and timelines, trauma-informed interviewing focuses on the victim's overall experience and reactions to the experience. Interviewers encourage the victim to tell their full story, in their timeline, by employing the use of open-ended questions. These skills are learned through training and through an understanding of the neurobiology of trauma.

Interviewees universally agreed that incorporating trauma-informed training as part of the SATF has improved investigations and victim outcomes.

As a result of this increased training, several interviewees noted that their perception of victims has changed. One interviewee, very honestly, noted that prior to participating in this training, they were less likely to believe victim's accounts of sexual assault. However, learning more about the neurobiology of trauma and how to use trauma-informed approaches helped alter their perception of how victims "should" behave.

Understand that victim-centered policing and investigations look different than traditional police investigations

As mentioned above, the SATF adheres to the elements of YHOP, including conducting interviews in a trauma-informed manner. As a result, interview times are usually longer because interviewers use open-ended questions and focus not just on what happened but also on how the victim felt, what they saw, what they heard, what they tasted, and how they reacted. Members of the SATF recognize that this is a "different kind of interview."

Not only is the interview length different, but the interviews may also take place in different locations. SATF detectives recognize that victim comfort is imperative to a positive interviewing experience. When needed, SATF detectives conduct their interviews in locations and times of the victim's choosing. All these changes have led to the SATF receiving increased information and follow-up leads.

These interviews may take longer than traditional police interviews. However, most of the interviewees, including a prosecutor, noted that the victim's needs should be the top priority—even if this means that the investigation does not end with a traditional criminal justice outcome (i.e., a prosecution).

"I don't know what you are going through, but I am here to help you, and guide you through the process."

-Law Enforcement Officer, on what trauma informed policing means

"The launching of the SATF really solidified that we are not turning back and that victims will be heard and believed."

-SATF Member



Actively engage with victim advocates to improve relationships with victims and improve outcomes for victims of sexual assault

SATF's victim advocates are housed in the same location as the SATF detectives, which has improved relationships and led to faster information exchanges. This has also led to improved relationships between the victim advocates and the victims. For example, victim advocates prefer to be present for the initial interview between the SATF detective and the victim. Although the victim advocate does not participate in interviewing, they support the victim and help address their needs. This allows the victim advocate to build trust with the victim by demonstrating they are not alone.

Interviewees noted that building stronger relationships with victims of sexual assault from the beginning can lead to improved outcomes. Additionally, interviewees felt that if the victim has more trust in the overall process, they may be more willing to come forward and report the initial case. After making the report, the victim may be willing to share more information with a SATF detective or victim advocate they have come to trust. For example, they may share more details about the incident that the detective can then follow up on to corroborate their statements. Additionally, interviewees indicated that they hoped victims would be more open with the detective and victim advocate about their comfort level with engaging with an investigation. Overall, members of the SATF had a general sense that improving victim outcomes may not always mean improving investigations; rather, it might mean increasing victim trust in the process—even when they choose not to engage with the investigation.

Actively engage with community partners to improve investigations and outcomes for victims of sexual assault

The SATF partners with several community organizations including the 17th Judicial District Sexual Assault Response Team, Ralston House, the District Attorney's Office, Reaching HOPE, and the Adams County Division of Child and Family Services. Interviewees noted that the goals of community partners and organizations have often conflicted with those of law enforcement agencies (e.g., social services and law enforcement).⁷ Through the SATF, however, the department has been engaging with community partners more formally and frequently, improving relationships and increasing the overall quality of investigations. For example, involving community partners in the SATF has increased collaboration throughout sexual assault investigations and has increased trust between the police departments and community organizations.

Implement criteria for tracking investigations to ensure that goals are being met

The SATF has sought to standardize its approach to sexual assault investigations. As part of the SPI grant, the SATF includes an unbiased outside researcher who analyzes relevant data and conducts evaluations. As a result, the SATF was able to develop a rubric in 2018 to track investigation activities empirically. This rubric "grades" the investigation by scoring specific actions for each investigation, beginning with the patrol officer's response.

⁷ For example, prior to the implementation of the task force social services organizations generally focused more on the victim's needs and less on case outcomes while law enforcement agencies focused more on case outcomes. With the implementation of the SATF, the focus has shifted to ensuring that outcomes are most focused on the victim's wishes.



For example, the rubric scores whether the responding officer thoroughly documented injuries, whether the investigator documented attempts to inform the victim about the investigation, and whether reports captured neutral, unbiased information on the victim's thoughts and emotional responses. This tool has allowed the SATF to measure detective performance based on best practices. The SATF has seen "an upward trajectory" of investigation scores (2020 Annual report, page 10). On average, "the lowest low is not as low anymore and the highest highs are higher."

However, interviewees noted that law enforcement buy-in is crucial for a tool like the rubric to be effective. When an investigation score falls below a designated point, the SATF sergeant and commanders are notified and provide feedback to the detective(s). The goal is for SATF leadership to use this information to improve overall performance and, once investigations are complete, to review investigations with SATF detectives.

LESSONS LEARNED

Interviewees identified a number of lessons learned from their experiences implementing a joint task force to improve sexual assault investigations.

Practical implementation decisions are paramount when beginning a joint endeavor

Interviewees almost uniformly noted difficulties in the practical implementation of the SATF. The two police departments had different internal cultures, different methods for conducting investigations, different locations, and different technologies. For these reasons, the more tangible aspects of creating this joint task force were initially problematic.

Multiple interviewees noted that merging the cultures of the two departments to form a cohesive unit was difficult. Detectives from both departments needed to learn to work together. However, one interviewee noted that this is common in joint projects because agencies have different internal cultures and processes. Recognizing this and encouraging an open dialogue between agencies is important to move beyond these cultural differences.

Additionally, each agency had its own internal IT infrastructure. Initially, stakeholders believed the technology would be compatible, but this proved to be false. Determining which agency would handle the IT problems was also difficult. Problems like these have no simple solutions, and early and frequent communication is key to resolving problems that arise when merging the functions of two agencies.

The SATF is offsite and not directly attached to either of the police departments, which some interviewees saw as positive and others as negative. For example, some individuals felt this separation gave the SATF a greater sense of team, while others believed it led to feelings of separation and isolation from the agencies. One interviewee noted the importance of "fine-tuning frontline supervision" to help combat these feelings of separation. By ensuring that supervisors are readily available to the detectives, the SATF increased internal buy-in and improved morale.



Trauma-informed policing as academy training

Trauma-informed policing and practices are needed throughout police departments—not just for members of the SATF. As mentioned previously, patrol officers typically respond to initial calls regarding sexual assaults, making them the first individuals from the department to speak with the victims. When the SATF was first implemented, each law enforcement officer received some training in trauma-informed policing, and more recently, this has become part of the academy training. Some interviewees noted the importance of trauma training throughout police work as both academy training and continuing education, not just limited to sexual assault investigations.

Interviewees noted that many members of law enforcement prefer not to handle sexual assault cases, and when this happens, cases can get pushed aside. To ensure that patrol officers are comfortable handling sexual assault cases and that responding officers treat victims appropriately, patrol officers need tools and training on trauma-informed approaches. For example, the SATF created a trauma-informed checklist of information that patrol officers need to obtain from victims before the SATF detective arrives on the scene and provided training on how to do so in a victim-centered manner. Patrol officers might not become fully certified as trauma-informed investigators, but providing them with training and these types of resources ensures that crucial steps are not overlooked and sets the stage for more positive engagement with the victim.

The possibilities of high turnover rates and the need for re-training should be addressed early

Turnover rates in the SATF are high. Currently, none of the initial SATF detectives remain on the task force. Some SATF detectives were promoted, but others chose to leave the SATF. Interviewees cited several reasons for the high turnover rates. For example, sexual assault investigations can be emotionally draining, and the members of the SATF, including only five detectives, carry heavy caseloads.

Although the SATF has been able to replace detectives, this turnover has ramifications. As interviewees noted, ideally the SATF would have a group of detectives who trained together and continue to work and grow together. However, with consistent turnover, SATF detectives have varying levels of training and experiences. Although each detective has a baseline of training, their levels of advanced training vary. This is especially true right now because training opportunities were hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees noted that this level of turnover, and the need for continuous training, should have been considered in the initial implementation of the SATF.

Shifting thought process behind what makes an investigation successful

Incorporating trauma-informed policing into sexual assault investigations requires adopting a victim-led investigation approach. To do so, SATF members had to shift their thinking about what makes an investigation successful. Although interviewees agreed that the SATF has improved sexual assault investigations and victim outcomes, the SATF has not seen an increase in cases prosecuted by the District Attorney's Office.

Traditional measurements for sexual assault outcomes typically include whether the District Attorney presented the case and whether the case resulted in a criminal conviction. The former is a measurement of success used



by the SATF. However, not all members of the SATF believe this measurement to be appropriate. Victims may not want their cases presented by the District Attorney's Office and may therefore choose not to participate in the investigation. However, if an investigation is victim centered and focused on achieving the victims' desired outcomes, members of the SATF believe this should be viewed as success, even if it does not lead to prosecution. One interviewee cautioned, however, that victim hesitancy should not be an excuse to close cases quickly.

As previously mentioned, the SATF provides a rubric to measure sexual assault investigations objectively, and the SATF has concrete data showing that their investigations are improving—even if this is not leading to increased cases presented by the District Attorney. This mindset may not be typical across law enforcement, but even a member of the District Attorney's Office noted that "sometimes what is right for the victim is not participating in the court process, and that is really hard. We are trying to focus on what is right for the victim, and that might not be what our natural instinct is."

Importance of acknowledging vicarious trauma

Police officers and victim advocates can experience vicarious trauma as a result of listening to victims recount their personal traumatic experiences. Vicarious trauma is typically studied among social workers and medical professionals but is infrequently studied within law enforcement (Morabito, Pattavina, and Williams, 2020).

SATF detectives carry high caseloads of only sexual assault cases, making vicarious trauma a pressing issue. The SATF attempted to address vicarious trauma by offering counseling services and peer support teams to the SATF detectives and victim advocates. Interviewees reported that the internal police culture is resistant to these efforts, despite the importance of addressing vicarious trauma. The SATF also required its members to participate in check-in sessions; however, these were not well received. The SATF has attempted to host sessions on this topic, but COVID-19 prevented these efforts in the past year.

All interviewees noted the importance of addressing vicarious trauma, but many noted that individuals may have their own ways of dealing with it. More formal approaches, such as speaking to a counselor or a therapist, may work for some individuals, while informal approaches, such as speaking to a supervisor or a peer, work better for others.



CONCLUSION

The SATF has taken many steps to ensure that they conduct sexual assault investigations in a victim-centered and trauma-informed manner. This includes adding trauma trainings, increasing community partnerships, and working closely with victim advocates. Although this task force is only a few years old, empirical evidence shows that the outcomes of its sexual assault investigations have improved, and anecdotal evidence shows that victim satisfaction levels have increased. The departments did encounter difficulties in incorporating trauma-informed approaches into investigations and working together to create a joint task force, but the overall outcomes have been positive. The SATF continues to improve its operations and the quality of victim-centered sexual assault investigations and prosecutions. Law enforcement agencies around the country should strive to incorporate trauma-informed interviewing and approaches into their daily operations. Doing so will improve their case outcomes and help improve their relationships with the community and victims of violent crime.



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