Strengthening the Police Response to Sexual Assault

Structural recommendations based on national, international best practices

Mayor's Office for Victims' Rights (MOVR)
www.sf.gov/MOVR

SHARED GOALS

1. Stronger cases
2. Prevent victim/ survivor attrition
3. More support for officers / investigators
4. Demonstrate the pursuit of justice

SHARP: Sexual Harassment & Assault Response + Prevention Office

SHARP'S MANDATE

Established in 2018 to serve as an ombuds office for survivors of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment by receiving complaints from survivors concerning the City's response to allegations of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment.

We help survivors navigate victim service systems to resolve complaints about the City's response to allegations of sexual assault and/or harassment.

We work with stakeholders to identify and develop solutions to improve the overall system of support for survivors and prevent re-traumatization, especially when navigating the criminal justice system.

OUR FOCUS

- **Direct Service**
- **Advocacy through a victim-centered, trauma-informed lens**
- **System Navigation**

INSIGHTS

- Survivors' experiences when navigating the criminal reporting process
- Gaps in service/resources available to survivors of sexual assault and sexual exploitation
- Gaps in coordination efforts across agencies that honor the promise of a "trauma-informed" approach.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

CLIENTS SERVED (24-26)

Total Unduplicated: 459

Sexual assault, abuse/exploitation, and harassment: 83

Sexual Assault: 65

Sexual Abuse/Exploitation: 15

Sexual Harassment: 3

RESOURCES FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS

SF Women Against Rape
crisis intervention services
1733 calls received (FY 25-26)
942 unduplicated clients

UCSF Trauma Recovery Center

Cooperative Restraining Order Clinic - Marsy Law Project

1 Expanded Patrol & SVU Training

RECOMMENDATION

- Patrol: Train on NIBRS sex-crime classification so cases are correctly identified and routed to SVU
- SVU: FETI (Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview) certification for all inspectors
- Train on the correct standard: probable cause

WHY IT'S A BEST PRACTICE

- NIBRS is the FBI’s incident-based reporting system, with more detailed and broader sex-crime definitions
- FETI is increasingly the professional standard for trauma interviewing
- FETI yields more accurate recall and communication from victims, and less secondary-trauma burnout for investigators

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

- Correct classification at patrol means cases reach SVU
- Better interviews build stronger cases and raise the chance of successful prosecution
- Applying probable cause as the standard means investigating cases centering the suspect's conduct and credibility and preventing premature “inactive” status

2 Streamlined Victim–Investigator Communication

RECOMMENDATION

- Defined case-assignment window (e.g., 2-3 business days)
- Primary investigator, with structured warm handoff when needed
- Milestone or interval-based check-ins
- Advocate (SHARP, SFWAR) referral repeated at first SVU contact and/or interview – mandated per Megan's Law

WHY IT'S A BEST PRACTICE

- Cuts the ad hoc status-check calls investigators absorb, and reduces survivor confusion or frustration and attrition
- SFPD's current 48-hour assignment goal is aspirational and unknown how often it is met
- Other departments commit to set intervals or milestones so survivors can rely on the timeframe, sustain trust in due process

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

- Log assignment timing in the chron (investigation chronology)
- Keep one primary investigator so survivors don't retell their story (SFPD already tries to)
- Check in at set intervals (e.g., every 2 weeks) or milestones (suspect interviewed, case presented to DA)
- Inspector asks whether the survivor has an advocate; if not, offers contacts and help connecting

3 Annual Independent Review

RECOMMENDATION

- Annual review of closed, inactive, and unfounded cases in aggregate
- A pattern-level quality check, NOT a review of any individual case or investigator's judgment
- Confidentiality

WHY IT'S A BEST PRACTICE

- Used by departments nationally, including Philadelphia, NYC, Baltimore, and Austin
- Today's only quality control is a lieutenant's sign-off, with no annual review of the big picture – and lieutenants can turn over
- Patterns able to surface and can be proactively addressed (e.g., overreliance on pretext calls, suspects not interviewed, witnesses not contacted, incidents mis-categorized, etc.)

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

- In Philadelphia, year 1 was internal audit of a random selection of closed or inactive cases
- Later years: trained outside advocates join annually, with NDAs, at police headquarters over 3-4 days
- Police choose the cases; findings first go to the Chief or Commission, not weaponized against the department but used to improve

4 Baseline Documentation Standard Before Case Inactivity or Closure

RECOMMENDATION

- A codified baseline of investigative events that must happen before a case is moved to closed or inactive
- Strengthen file defensibility, expectations
- Survivors understand what will happen and why
- SFPD cannot guarantee outcomes, but can consistently demonstrate that they are conducting thorough investigations

WHY IT'S A BEST PRACTICE

- SFPD currently has no codified baseline for moving a case from active to inactive
- A known, consistent standard gives investigators clear expectations and helps protect the department
- Pairs with the **annual review**, which can test whether the standard is being met

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

- Required actions: interview suspect(s); canvass for video and witnesses; review all forensic evidence; interview witnesses; review suspect's social media and criminal record, etc.
- No case goes inactive until all are done and checked for quality of action taken, not just a checklist

5 Suspect-Centered Investigative Technique

RECOMMENDATION

- Center the investigation first and foremost on corroborating or contradicting the suspect's account and behavior

WHY IT'S A BEST PRACTICE

- Aligns with the national shift reflected in DOJ guidance and IACP training
- A technique upgrade associated with higher clearance and prosecution rates
- Most SFPD inspectors likely already work this way, but this must be consistent over time

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

- Independent annual review shows whether any problem is department-wide or tied to certain officers
- Flags investigations not centered on the suspect's conduct or credibility
- Reinforced by the baseline documentation standard (suspect interview, records, social media)