Women's Law Project

City and County of San Francisco Board of Supervisors
Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee
Joint Hearing - Staffing Needs, Policies, and Procedures Responding to Sexual Assault

Testimony of Women's Law Project
By: Lila Slovak, Director of the Philadelphia Office
October 8, 2026

INTRODUCING AN ADVOCATE-LED CASE REVIEW IN THE SAN FRANCISCO POLICE DEPARTMENT SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT TO IMPROVE THE RESPONSE TO REPORTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Women's Law Project (WLP) is a stated-based public interest legal organization that engages in high impact litigation, legislative advocacy, direct legal assistance, and community education to advance the rights of women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people and their families in Pennsylvania and beyond. I am the director of WLP's Philadelphia office, and I lead our sexual and domestic violence practice, including the annual advocate review of the Philadelphia Police Department Special Victims Unit's handling of sexual assault cases.

Our work advocating to improve police response to sex crimes began in 1999 when an investigative newspaper report revealed that, much like the current reports in San Francisco, the Philadelphia Police Department had failed to adequately investigate thousands of rapes and other sex crimes, and was downgrading these cases by coding them in a non-criminal category. During the previous two decades, approximately 30% of all sexual assault-related complaints had been buried this way. The revelations exposed deeply entrenched bias against rape victims and prompted advocates to press for reform, accountability, and meaningful oversight.

In response, then-Police Commissioner John Timoney initiated an internal audit. As a result, 681 rape cases, and 1,141 sexual assault cases were re-opened and investigated. To maintain police accountability, Women's Law Project was invited to design and implement an unprecedented review of rape and sexual assault complaints at the Philadelphia Police Department's Special Victims Unit (SVU). For the last 26 years, WLP has led a team of professional victim-advocates in the annual review of hundreds of SVU files, including all unfounded rape complaints and a sample of open cases. We assess the thoroughness and outcome of each investigation, raise questions, and provide feedback to police. This case review, now known as the Philadelphia Model, is recognized as a national best practice and is a model for San Francisco.

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The Unique Nature of Sexual Assault Requires a Specialized Approach

Most people who experience rape or sexual assault do not report the incident to law enforcement.[1] Victims of sexual assault face a complex combination of personal, social, practical, and systemic barriers that can conspire to make reporting to police difficult or unimaginable. Research consistently shows that most assaults are never reported because victims fear the consequences of reporting or doubt that reporting will help them or anyone else. Some of the common barriers to reporting sexual assault include:

1. **Fear of Not Being Believed –** Victims worry that police, family members, friends, or others will question their account of what happened. Sexual assault cases often involve limited physical evidence, delayed reporting, or an acquaintance perpetrator, which can make victims fear skepticism or blame.

2. **Shame, Embarrassment, and Self-Blame –** Sexual assault can leave victims feeling humiliated or responsible for what happened. Victims may ask themselves whether they could have prevented the assault, or they may worry that others will judge their behavior, clothing, alcohol use, or decisions before, during, or after the assault.

3. **Fear of Retaliation –**Victims may fear retaliation from the perpetrator, including physical violence, harassment or stalking, threats against loved ones, interference with or manipulation of social or professional networks, disclosure of private information or images, and threats of retaliatory lawsuits. This concern can be especially strong when the offender is a current or former partner, family member, coworker, supervisor, or community member because of the access they have to the victim's life.

4. **Relationship with the Offender –** Most sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. Victims may care about the offender despite the assault, depend on the offender financially or emotionally, share children with the offender, or worry about disrupting family or social relationships.

5. **Trauma Responses –** Trauma can affect memory, decision-making, and behavior. In the immediate aftermath of an assault, victims may feel numb or confused, try to avoid thinking about the event, have difficulty recalling certain details or sequences of events, and they may be focused on restoring a sense of safety rather than reporting. These are normal responses to traumatic experiences, and are often reflexive responses, but they can delay, prevent, or complicate reporting.

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[1] Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Women and Rape: A Review of the Literature*, Brandeis University Feminist Sexual Ethics Project 1 (2009), https://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/slavery/united-states/slav-us-articles/nash2009.pdf (finding black women are less likely to report rape to police than white women); Patricia Tjaden & Nancy Thoennes, *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Rape Victimization: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE 33 (2006), https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/210346.pdf (finding that only 19.1 percent of women who were raped since their 18th birthday reported the crime); Patricia A. Washington, *Disclosure Patterns of Black Female Sexual Assault Survivors*, 7 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 1254, 1272 (2001).

6. **Concern About the Criminal Justice Process –** Victims may not know what to expect when they make a report and may worry that it will be emotionally exhausting or that they will lose control over what happens to them next. Some victims feel that reliving the trauma throughout the legal process may worsen their distress.

7. **Lack of Confidence in the System –** Due to prior personal experiences or stories they have heard, some victims believe police will not take their case seriously or that prosecution is unlikely. They may therefore believe that there is no point in reporting, or that reporting is not worth the emotional cost.

8. **Social, Cultural, and Community Factors –** Certain social, cultural, religious, or community norms may discourage discussing or reporting sexual violence. Victims may face pressure to remain silent to protect family reputation, avoid community stigma or damage to their reputation, preserve relationships, and avoid negative impacts on work, school, or family life.

9. **Practical Barriers –** Victims may encounter practical obstacles such as lack of transportation, childcare responsibilities, language barriers, immigration-related concerns, disability-related access issues, or limited knowledge about reporting options.

Victims who overcome these barriers and decide to report deserve a thorough, bias-free, trauma-informed investigation. As the first responders in the criminal justice system, police play a critical role not only in the outcome of an investigation, but also in a victim/survivor's sense of safety and trust. It is not unique to hear from survivors of sexual assault that, in ways both big and small, they feel dismissed, disbelieved, blamed, belittled, and ignored by police.

Police should be required to undergo specialized training, including trauma-informed interview techniques, before investigating adult sexual assault. Yet, in California, while officers assigned to investigate sexual exploitation and abuse of children must undergo specialized training, there is no such requirement for officers investigating adult sexual assault.[2]

Change is Needed in San Francisco

One in five women in California report experiencing sexual assault.[3] According to recent investigative reporting by *The San Francisco Standard*, in the last five years, San Francisco has cleared the lowest rate of rape cases of any county in the state, and the percentage of rape cases the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) has solved has fallen by more than 50% in the past decade.[4] In 2025, 478 sexual assault cases were assigned to SFPD, but SFPD presented only 52 to the district attorney's office for prosecution.[5] San Francisco can do better.

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[2] Working Group on Support for Survivors of Sexual Assault, Final Report (April 2025), at 11, *available at* https://sfgov.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=14158902&GUID=A35F5DE7-E591-4944-91DE-C8C5E420EFFB).
[3] *Id.* at 3.
[4] Anya Schultz, Her Rape Kit Had a DNA Match. In San Francisco, That's Not Enough, S.F. STANDARD (July 20, 2026, 1:00 PM), *available at* https://sfstandard.com/2026/07/20/sfpd-rape-kit-investigation/.
[5] *Id.*

To improve the institutional response to reports of sexual violence, the Working Group on Support for Survivors of Sexual Assault, co-chaired by First Partner Siebel Newsom and retired Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley, recommended six concrete steps.[6] Briefly, these recommendations include:

- Participating in trauma-informed interviewing education
- Developing comprehensive policies that mandate trauma-informed responses to victims of sexual violence
- Requiring all sexual assault investigators, of both child and adult crimes, to complete training on sexual assault
- Adopting victim-centered interview techniques
- Increasing promotion capacity in SVUs

The SFPD could advance all of these recommendations by implementing an annual, confidential advocate-led case review.

The Philadelphia Model: A Confidential, Annual, Victim-Advocate-Led Case Review

During the past 26 years, WLP and its partners have reviewed thousands upon thousands of cases in Philadelphia, and in other jurisdictions as consultants. The case review model goes beyond identifying problems in individual cases. It provides advocates and the police the opportunity to track systemic issues—including sex bias, inadequate supervision, pressure to keep crime data low, insufficient resources and training, and vicarious trauma—while creating an ongoing mechanism to address them and ensure accountability.

Since Philadelphia implemented an annual advocate case review, investigations have become more thorough, case coding has become more accurate, and investigators are less likely to interrogate, disbelieve, or blame victims. The review also brings victim advocates and police together each year to strengthen the response to sexual violence, support victims, and improve accountability.

A case review can be transformative. In the words of Margo Alleyne-Parker,[7] former Captain of the Philadelphia Police Department Special Victim's Unit,:

[6] Working Group on Support for Survivors of Sexual Assault, Final Report, at 17-18.

[7] Margo Alleyne-Parker brings 30 years of law enforcement experience, including 29 years with the Philadelphia Police Department. She spent 10 years in the Special Victims Unit, advancing from Sergeant to Lieutenant and ultimately Captain before retiring in 2026. Her career reflects a deep dedication to public service, supporting victims, and strengthening the communities she has proudly served.

> As Captain of the Special Victims Unit, I saw firsthand that the annual case review was an effective tool for driving meaningful and lasting change. The review strengthened investigative practices, improved supervision, and created a consistent process for identifying concerns, recognizing progress, and ensuring that lessons learned were translated into better outcomes for victims.
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> Equally important, the review enabled SVU supervisors and detectives to engage directly with advocates in a candid, constructive process. That collaboration helped us strengthen the law-enforcement response to sexual violence, better support victims throughout an investigation, and improve accountability at every level of the unit.

Philadelphia is not alone. New York City and several Canadian cities have publicly adopted the Philadelphia Model, offering San Francisco proven examples to draw from as it builds a stronger, survivor-centered response.[8]

Moving Forward

Women's Law Project commends the San Francisco Board of Supervisors for holding hearings on sexual assault investigations within the San Francisco Police Department. We urge San Francisco to establish an independent, ongoing sex crime case review to create a structured process for identifying investigative patterns, strengthening accountability, and improving police practices. Importantly, an annual case review would demonstrate to victims and the public-at-large San Francisco's long-term commitment to the dignity, support, and respect of survivors of sexual assault.

Women's Law Project is available to help San Francisco build and implement this process. Supporting survivors, maintaining public trust, and driving meaningful reform and accountability require all of us to work together.

[8] Joanne Laucius, Ottawa Police to Convene Civilian Panel to Review Handling of Sex-Assault Cases, OTTAWA CITIZEN (updated July 28, 2017), https://ottawasun.com/2017/07/27/ottawa-police-to-convene-civilian-panel-to-review-handling-of-sex-assault-cases ("The Ottawa police announced this spring they are adopting a Philadelphia-type panel, but details are still being ironed out. Similar panels are in place in cities across North America.").

From: Janelle White
To: Board of Supervisors (BOS); Crayton, Monique (BOS)
Cc: Lee, Ivy (MYR)
Subject: Support for MOVR"s Recommendations on SFPD Sexual Assault Investigations
Date: Tuesday, October 13, 2026 12:52:56 PM

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Dear Members of the SF Board of Supervisors & Clerk Crayton,

My name is Janelle L. White. I am the Executive Director of San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR). SFWAR is the California Office of Emergency Services funded community-based rape crisis center serving SF City & County since 1973. I am writing on behalf of SFWAR to share our unequivocal support for the recommendations detailed by the staff of the Mayor's Office for Victim's Rights with respect SFPD's investigations of sexual assault during the Oct 8th public hearing convened by Supervisor Melgar.

We are heartened that the SFPD committed to a number of the outlined recommendations, *and* we ask the Board to work toward ensuring SFPD further commits to (1) the aggregate annual independent review of closed, inactive, and unfounded sexual assault cases *and* (2) utilizes the standard of a credible report of a survivor being sufficient probable cause to forward a case to the SFDA's Office for a charging decision.

It is not my intention to drag the SFPD, as SFWAR has had many significant positive collaborations with SFPD over the past several decades. I want to share some of that history, as I believe it can be instructive as we chart a course forward to improve law enforcement response to sexual assault suvivors. For example, in 2017, former SFPD Assistant Chief Redmond and former Department for Police Accountability staff attorney Samara Marion were instrumental in establishing a reporting procedure where SFPD responded to the SFWAR office to take survivors' initial police reports. This unit order significantly decreased frustration survivors consistently experience when trying to make reports at district police stations, such as long wait times, lack of access to a confidential space to make the report, being turned away and asked to go to another district station to report, or being asked to return at another time due to lack of staff available to take the report. SFWAR has retained internal documentation of this protocol.

As staffing became a significant issue for SFPD, they were no longer able to accomodate this procedure. I strongly champion a return to this protocol and offer any and all support to make it possible for SFPD to once again adopt this approach

as a unit order or DGO. While I recognize the Board's focus has been on SFPD investigations, there are also significant barriers to survivors reporting to law enforcement, as was shared by advocates and community members during the recent special hearing,

Other affirmative actions SFPD has taken over the past decade include SFPD clearing the rape kit backlog and addressing the lack of consistent follow-up with sexual assault survivors regarding the status of their cases. With respect to the later, in 2017/2018 Chief Greg Suhr issued an order requiring SVU investigators to consistently follow-up with sexual assault survivors, including when the case is closed or determined to be inactive. Former DOSW Policy Analyst Minouche Kandel was instrumental in effecting this change. Clearly this is no longer standard operating procedure, as survivors continue to consistently report they have not heard from a SVU Investigator, have no idea who their assigned SVU Investigator is, are unaware of the status of their case, etc.

A final positive collaboration I will share surrounds the recent revision of DGO 6.16 Sexual Assault Investigations. SFWAR and other community members working in the area of crisis intervention and advocacy for sexual assault survivors were invited to participate in a community working group to review and revise SFPD DGO 6.16 Sexual Assault Investigations. This group began during the late part of 2024 and the final version of DGO 6.16 was adopted and implemented in January 2026. These opportunities for community advocates, survivors, and SFPD to work cooperatively are invaluable to creating better policy responses and to (re)building SFPD rapport with the community.

With respect to the power of relationships, when former SFPD Commander Rachel Moran was on the force, she provided me with her direct cell phone contact to use whenever a survivor we were working with was facing SFPD related barriers. She always answered my call, even after she was no longer directly working as part of SVU. This type of committed direct communication was particularly helpful as we advocate for survivors and support them in navigating systems' barriers.

I have shared these systemic successes to show change is possible.Yet, unfortunately, as I am certain you are thinking, many of these critical changes to improve law enforcement's response to sexual assault survivors have fallen away. Arguably, decreased SFPD staffing, along with high rates of SFPD staff reassignments has resulted in a lack of institutional memory and a loss of these important systemic changes. It is my hope that we might reinstitute some of what I have outlined, while SFPD also embarks on implementing MOVR's recommendations for accountability with respect to sexual assault investigations.

In my over 30 years of work as an advocate in the movement to end sexual violence

and as an academic with a 20 year tenure as a lecturer in the Women & Gender Studies Department of San Francisco State University, I know the San Francisco community has the knowledge, skills, and formalized structures to effect the changes needed to improve law enforecement's response to sexual assault survivors. Sustained commitment is also required. Please know that SFWAR is here and committed to do our part.

Thank you for taking the time to read my correspondence. Please know you can call upon me should you have any questions or if you might like additional clarification regarding what I have shared.

Sending warmest regards,
j

Janelle L. White, PhD

Executive Director

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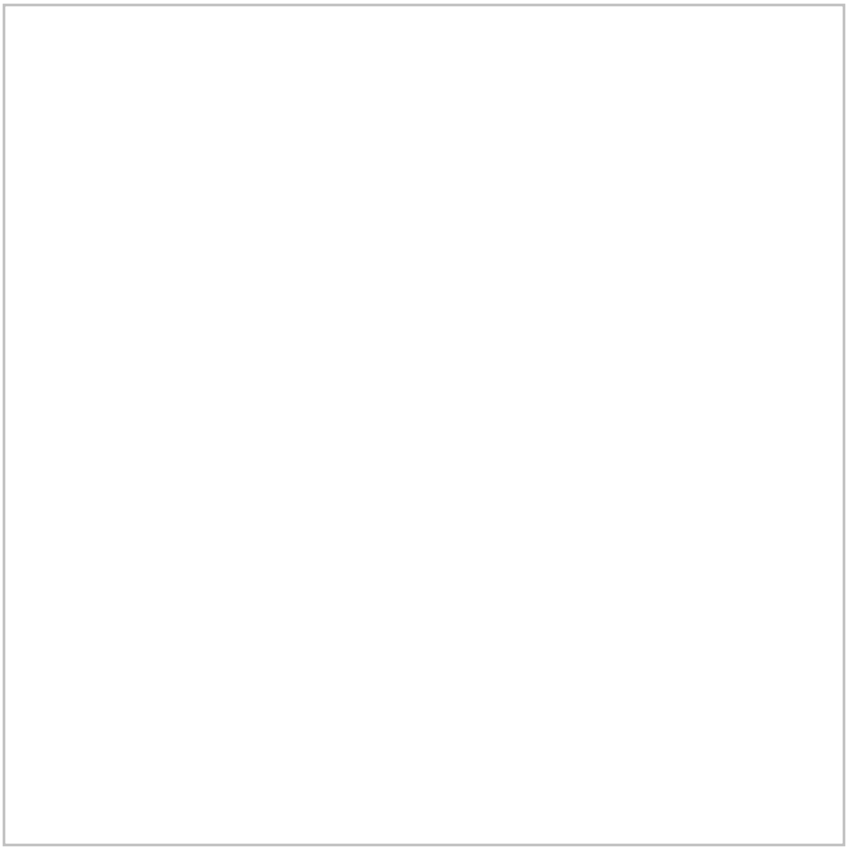

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