

Changing Culture Through Sharing Space: A Case Study of the Cuyahoga County Sexual Assault Kit Task Force

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Executive Summary

“It’s a team effort that involves the prosecutor, the investigator, the advocate, and the victim as well.”

– Cuyahoga County Sexual Assault Kit Task Force team member

This research brief, the first in a series of research briefs, details a key finding from a process evaluation that we conducted with the Cuyahoga County Sexual Assault Kit (SAK) Task Force (Task Force)—**the efficacy of having a shared space for a multidisciplinary team that is responsible for tackling the issue of unsubmitted SAKs in their community.** Our research finds that being in close proximity for extended periods of time has many positive outcomes including engendering a cultural shift that can break through disciplinary silos leading to more positive experiences for victims and successful prosecutions.

In 2015, the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor’s Office (CCPO) was awarded an almost \$2 million grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) as part of the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI). The findings presented in this research brief are derived from a process evaluation we conducted in collaboration with the Task Force and funded from this award. This research was undertaken in order to provide recommendations and research-based “promising practices” for other jurisdictions that are in the process of tackling their backlog of unsubmitted SAKs.

This brief explores key themes that were identified in the process evaluation. Specifically, we focus on the positive outcomes of the shared space, namely fostering a commitment to excellence, overcoming parochialism, increasing morale, improving communication, and promoting the full use of every team member’s talents. We also discuss some drawbacks and workarounds of the shared office space.

The interview protocol for the process evaluation did not specifically include a question pertaining to a shared office space. However, *almost every single respondent mentioned, in some manner, the importance of the shared space*, which is why we chose this to be the topic of our first research brief from the process evaluation. The findings and recommendations detailed in this brief can be applicable to jurisdictions that are currently tackling or beginning to address their jurisdiction’s unsubmitted SAKs, regardless of whether those efforts are currently being funded under BJA SAKI grants.

Recommendations

1. **Ideally, secure an office space where prosecutors, investigators, and victim advocates from the SAKI team¹ can all work together.** There are likely other members of the SAKI team, namely medical professionals and lab technicians, that will not be able to physically share office space. In this instance, preferably, at least one medical professional and one lab technician should be located in the shared office space.
2. **If possible, ensure that the shared workspace is in a separate location from the lead agency's workspace.** This allows the Task Force to become its own separate entity and not just a replication of the lead agency, as well as encourages buy-in from the entire working group.
3. **If possible, arrange the office so that workspaces for prosecutors, investigators, and victim advocate are intermingled.** This can promote collaboration and camaraderie across disciplines.
4. **If possible, have at least one victim advocate's workspace near the main entrance and/or walkway.** If this is not possible, arrange the office so that the victim advocates' workspaces are not isolated from the rest of the office. This helps keep the victim advocates, who have the potential to be more isolated, engaged in the process.
5. In the absence of one shared space, we recommend doing the best you can to have the SAKI team work in close proximity together. **Thus, if the office space is not large enough or the SAKI team is unable to secure a shared workspace for prosecutors, investigators, and victim advocates, then as a next best practice, victim advocates and investigators should be working in one office space.** Try to ensure that the workspace for the prosecutors is close in proximity. If it is not possible to have the workspaces of prosecutors in close proximity, then at least one prosecutor's workspace should be in the shared office.
6. **Promote collaboration across disciplines when possible.** Examples of collaboration include involving the victim advocates in ride-alongs with investigators, going to court together, prosecutors, investigators, and victim advocates meeting with victims as a group. The shared office space makes organizing these group "outings" easier.

7. **Ensure some type of electronic management system that allows for all team members to have access to updates on the case in real time.** In the absence of an electronic management software program, keep case notes on a shared network drive or document sharing software.
8. **Have the entire SAKI team meet regularly (e.g., at least once-a-month) to discuss cases, barriers, and progress on the SAKI team and share successes.**
9. **Encourage the use of formalized protocols.** Having a formalized procedure for how to investigate cases, how to notify victims, etc., will ensure that all on the team know each other's roles and help keep each other accountable. Formalized protocols will also help reduce the learning curve for new team members.

Methodology

Starting in early 2016, the SAKI researchers began conducting a mixed-method (e.g., qualitative and quantitative) process evaluation of the Task Force—including all aspects of investigation, victim advocacy, and prosecution of unsubmitted SAK cases. A *process evaluation* is an assessment of how a program is implemented. Process evaluations focus on the “process” of a program’s activities and output—the who, what, when, and why.

For this process evaluation, we interviewed eighteen Task Force team members, reviewed performance/outcome measures, policies and procedures, analyzed existing data on the team’s progress, and conducted participant observation.

We employed *purposive sampling* for the interviews of Task Force members. *Purposive sampling* is a type of non-probability sampling where cases or individuals are selected for inclusion in the study based upon characteristics of the population and the objective of the study. We first sampled based on the job position of the team member (e.g., prosecutor, investigator, victim advocate), as this is a key aspect of the process evaluation. Within job position, we employed a maximum variation (“heterogeneity”) purposive sampling—in order to increase the diversity of responses.

All eighteen interviews were conducted by the same researcher. The interviews were *semi-structured*, meaning that we had a pre-determined set of open-ended questions; however, the discussion was allowed to veer in different directions in

order to further explore emerging themes and/or responses.

The interviews were audio recorded (except for one, where the respondent chose to not be audio taped). The interviewer also took notes during the interviews. Audio files from the interviews were transcribed into textual data. These data were coded using ATLAS.ti (a qualitative analysis software program). We employing iterative coding stages, where the first coding state involves initial open coding, followed by the categorization and re-categorization of the codes, and ending with the creation of axial/theme codes.

The same researcher who conducted the interviews also conducted participant observation as an embedded researcher in the Task Force over a period of over eight months. This researcher attended weekly team meetings as well as worked in the Task Force's office on a weekly basis. The researcher maintained field notes, which were reviewed during data analysis and informed the findings.

Background of the Cuyahoga County Sexual Assault Kit Task Force

In early 2013, Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Timothy McGinty formed the Cuyahoga County Sexual Assault Kit Task Force (Task Force) to tackle the investigative and prosecutorial workload resulting from the testing of previously unsubmitted SAKs. Under the aegis of the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office (CCPO), the Task Force includes CCPO prosecutors, justice-system victim advocates employed by CCPO, and investigators (detectives detailed from the Cleveland Department of Police, investigators from the Cuyahoga County Sherriff's Office, investigators from the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigations [BCI], and investigators employed by the CCPO). The Task Force also collaborates closely with BCI, the state crime lab that is testing the SAKs, and well as Cleveland Rape Crisis Center (CRCC).

How the Cuyahoga County Task Force Came to Share a Space

When the Task Force was first formed, leadership sought input from outside consultants regarding the formation of the Task Force. One of the first recommendations from the consultants that was put into place was having a separate office space in which all of the Task Force members would be located, irrespective of discipline—a space that was not nested physically within the CCPO's main office space. Originally, the purpose of the shared space was to allow the

work to be done more quickly and efficiently. *This recommendation, from the outside consultant, has proven to be one of the most significant factors in the success of the Task Force for reasons detailed in this brief.*

Positive Outcomes of the Shared Space

Commitment to Excellence

During the interviews, people were very clear about how invested both they and their colleagues were in the outcomes of the Task Force. Not only did the entire team share a space, they all attended a weekly meeting with leadership where statistics and individual cases were reviewed. Working so closely together, both physically and at the weekly meeting, individuals were constantly reinforcing the high standards set at the beginning of the project, pushing each other harder and supporting one another in achieving excellence.

For most sexual assaults, the process involves a detective in a police department handing off the case to a prosecutor in the prosecutor's office, if it proceeds from an investigation to prosecution. Because everyone on the Task Force can follow cases from beginning to end within the same unit and agency, people feel committed to achieving the best possible outcome. One of the prosecutors said,

"I think that within this Task Force—the investigations have become so good, probably better than the investigations in the other units in [the Prosecutor's] office. It's really quite a high bar, a high standard of investigation. I have a lot of interaction with the investigators—they actually seem to embrace that high standard and really excel on it and we've been successful with locating victims and witnesses that we may not have been successful with when the Task Force first started and before that when the Task Force didn't exist."

In this way, we see how working closely together directly impacts the success of the Task Force.

Overcoming Parochialism

Sharing office space helped break down the traditional barriers between the disciplines and was integral in creating a new team removed from interdepartmental politics. In the justice system, there is a tendency for disciplines and jurisdictions to work in silos. Interactions are often characterized by territorialism and "ego." The

lead researcher observed how important it is that everyone is employed¹ by the same entity, which reduces the “turf” people feel possessive over. The Task Force is innovative in how it overcomes this propensity to create a strong, multidisciplinary team.

Physical isolation (the office was located in another building separate from the prosecutor’s office) was part of the key to allowing the Task Force to develop its own culture—apart from its constituent department. Tearing down these walls, while not always comfortable, ultimately served the victims, as one prosecutor observed,

“By forcing these different disciplines to be together in a central location, we’ve been able to force direct communication between those different agencies and, we think, improve our systems, if you will, when we contact the victims, how often we contact the victims, we all get on the same page. So we try to be less intrusive towards the victims by having everybody communicating how that’s to happen.”

Another important component in dismantling parochialism was how being close to one another created a *sense of informality*. It was easier for people to seek help from someone from another agency or discipline in an informal, low-risk setting, thereby increasing collaboration that may not have otherwise resulted if formal chains-of-command and inter-agency requests had to be followed. Additionally, people began to value experience over credentials because they came to know individuals and not roles.

Involving victim advocates so closely with the investigation is another innovation of the Task Force and the relationship between victim advocates and investigators has particularly benefitted from sharing space. As one victim advocate noted,

“Historically advocates were always stepping on the toes of prosecutors and law enforcement so they weren’t really utilized or they didn’t want to utilize them. We’re not those grassroots advocates that used to be out there. We truly want to be here to help.”

Ride-alongs, although not based in the office, were another opportunity for investigators to share space with victim advocates. This joint experience gave them a common starting place for dialogue but the car ride also served as a time and

¹ Some of the investigators are detailed to the Task Force, rather than directly employed by them, but they still answer to the same hierarchy and are, for all intents and purposes, employees.

place to debrief together before filing an official report. Interestingly, the lead researcher observed that *it was often the victim advocates diffusing tension and building bridges between disciplines, pointing to the importance of their role in shaping the Task Force culture.*

Increasing Morale

Seeing others' commitment, particularly the prosecutors', increases morale as each individual's efforts result in tangible outcomes. One of the investigators said,

"I feel it is a much more involved process when you can see from the beginning right to the court. You feel more successful, more driven. You feel driven because we are all collaborating and I like that."

Frequent socialization creates close colleagues who do not want to disappoint one another. In a small office, it is difficult to avoid people, so if a person is owed their portion of shared work, it becomes quickly apparent.

Shared space increases the *opportunity for laughing and joking*, which makes the team more cohesive. In fact, the lead researcher noted the fraternal nature of the environment, which was reinforced through branding. The team had created a logo for the Task Force that appeared on mugs, white boards, and t-shirts. A victim advocate promoted the positives of socialization by observing,

"The Task Force as a whole here in this building is a phenomenal addition. When we were over across the street we were much smaller but we were scattered all over the place. Having everyone here in the same place—sit down have some coffee, have some lunch—everyone is right here. That's the biggest benefit of having the space over here for the Task Force."

One person even said that her coworkers have begun to "*...feel like family*," an important distinction because she said she felt like everyone could disagree and still be working together towards the common good.

Improving Communication

Better communication between Task Force members is an obvious benefit of sharing a space, but the ways in which it plays out may not be obvious. First, people are *more likely to discuss things face-to-face*, which reduces misunderstandings and builds trust. In a face-to-face discussion, prosecutors can get details about victim

interviews that cannot be conveyed in a written report, such as demeanor and affect.

Second, *the “open door” policy of leadership* means people are able to discuss difficult or sensitive topics freely and point to where more training or policy change is needed. This allows for real-time shifts in focus to be more effective.

Third, *the weekly meetings are important for group communication*. It also sets norms and the leaders model seeking input from other disciplines, creating a culture of collaboration. This leads to open knowledge sharing, an important strength of a team with such diverse backgrounds and skill sets.

Finally, increased communication leads to a *more victim-centered approach*, as everyone is aware of how often and how the victim is being contacted and what information is conveyed. Being in the same office makes it easy for investigators and advocates to be on the same phone call with a victim because it is easy to walk down the hall to the other’s office.

Promoting the Full Use of Everyone’s Talents

Being close to one another increases the likelihood that everyone’s talents will be used to their full extent because team members are intimately familiar with the strengths of their colleagues, whether that be a knowledge of drug treatment centers, tenacity in court, or a deft touch while interviewing victims.

Investigators and prosecutors are more likely to call on victim advocates in a variety of situations, which benefits victims in the short run and benefits the Task Force as a whole in the long run as victims are more likely to cooperate if they feel valued. Investigators also get quick feedback from prosecutors on whether a case is sufficient so they can manage their caseload efficiently.

Rather than seeing diversity as an impediment, people on the Task Force embrace it:

“I really think everybody coming from somewhere different is the best part. You have so much experience in this building, like hundreds of years, but it’s not from the same place. It’s not all from the suburbs; it’s not all inner city. It’s not all homicide; it’s not all sex crimes; it’s not all narcotics. Like I said, we come from different places, not only career-wise, but your lifestyle, we come from totally different places.”

Because people come from a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience, investigators can seek help with heavy caseloads or requests from prosecutors so that they are not tempted to close cases just to get them off their desks, which was part of what led to the backlog in the first place.

Drawbacks and Workarounds

No system is perfect and having everyone housed in the same office is not without its drawbacks. On an individual level, some people prefer to work independently rather than collaboratively and at least one person voiced concern that he was being “...told how to do [his] job” when he had years of experience behind him. *This is the particular attitude that most people were working to overcome as they received shared training and worked closely together across agency lines.*

Due to the nature of the Task Force, it is full of highly-motivated, driven personalities, which can lead to tension if people seem to be working at odds with one another. For this reason, it is important to constantly reaffirm common goals, particularly during the regularly scheduled team meetings.

Finally, not everyone is located in the shared office all of the time. In one case, a supervisor is located primarily in another building, so one person sometimes skips that supervisor and reports directly to a member of the leadership team, thereby circumventing the chain of command. This speaks to the importance of having everyone housed together as much as possible.

Conclusion

The synergy created by having a shared space isolated from the rest of the department has promoted the formation of a high-performing, victim-centered unit that makes good use of its multidisciplinary team.

In addition to shared office space, weekly meetings consistently reiterate the goals and approaches of the team, thereby creating norms. The culture has coalesced around victim-centeredness, which can be interpreted differently by different disciplines, but gives everyone a common goal and language. This occasionally competes with protecting community safety as a goal, but even then, people try to approach it with the victim in mind. Having a centralized location is among the highest recommendations for other jurisdictions. In closing, it is worth quoting one of the Task Force members at length:

“I would say keeping it tight knit ... That means you know everybody you work with, that means you know each other’s schedules, you know who does what and who’s good at what, you know the strengths and weaknesses of each other, who can help you, and then that opens up lines of communication. So we have each other’s cell phones, we have each other’s text messages, we have emails, we have notes in Justice Matters and our Justice Matters notes are huge. Because we can all see what each other is doing, and that goes from the judicial side to the investigation side to the advocacy side. We know what’s going on with the victim, we know what’s going on with the defendant, we know who’s called who, who’s talked to who, where these people are and that’s probably one of the best things that we have going here.”

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ⁱⁱ The SAKI team is comprised of all multi-disciplinary members of the SAKI working group, including but not limited to prosecutors, investigators, victim advocates, medical professionals, and lab technicians.