

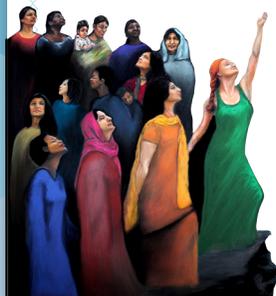
# Does the Justice Advocate Position Enhance Sex Crimes Investigations?

**A REPORT to the HOUSTON SEXUAL ASSAULT  
KIT ACTION RESEARCH WORKING GROUP**

*March 2015*

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<sup>1</sup> Released March 20, 2015

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2011, the National Institute of Justice provided funding for the Houston Police Department to form a multidisciplinary team to study the problem of sexual assault kits (SAK) that had been collected but never submitted to a crime lab for screening and testing. The Houston Action-Research Project sought to understand the factors that produced the volume of unsubmitted SAKs, the way forensic evidence is used during criminal investigations and prosecutions of sexual assaults, and what stakeholders should expect when large numbers of previously unsubmitted SAKs get tested. The project adopted a holistic approach and considered the broader issue of responses, beyond testing the kits, to sexual assaults in the community.

Houston's Action-Research Project Working Group includes representatives from the following organizations:

- Houston Forensic Science Center <sup>2</sup>
- Harris County District Attorney's Office
- Harris Health System
- Houston Area Women's Center
- Houston Police Department Sex Crimes Investigative Units
- Memorial Hermann Health System
- Sam Houston State University – Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology
- The University of Texas at Austin – Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

The group has been working collaboratively and collecting data that have allowed for an understanding of multiple aspects of the local response system. The organizations that have been working on this project have also been implementing and evaluating reforms that are meant to improve the response to sexual assaults. Action research entails an iterative process in which research evidence informs responses, and, for this reason, the project has generated multiple research reports. This is one of a number of reports and presentations that will be released to help other jurisdictions learn from our experiences as they seek to better understand and improve their own practices.

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Learn more about the project at [www.houstonsakresearch.org](http://www.houstonsakresearch.org)

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<sup>2</sup> During the course of the project the crime lab was reorganized so that in April 2014 the crime lab became an independent organization from Houston Police Department.

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## **BACKGROUND**

The Justice Advocate (JA) position was created to support Sex Crimes Unit investigators at the Houston Police Department (HPD) to engage and re-engage victims<sup>3</sup> in the criminal justice system. Overall, the goal of this position is to enhance the investigative process through increased victim participation. Six months after implementation of the position, investigators reflected on the utility and usefulness of the JA and the impact of this role on their investigations.

The JA duties are to:

1. Establish and maintain contact with victims in collaboration with investigators.
2. Identify victims with complex psychosocial needs and serve those needs.
3. Connect victims to other needed resources.
4. Serve as a liaison between HPD and community organizations.
5. Document victim contact.

*Purpose of this Assessment:* To assess the JA position embedded in the Sex Crimes Unit at HPD.

## **METHODS**

Data were collected using a focus-group methodology with seven sworn personnel from the HPD Adult and Juvenile Sex Crimes Units, including the ranks of lieutenant, sergeant, and investigators. The duration of the focus group was 75 minutes.

### *Research Questions:*

1. Does the justice advocate position enhance sex crimes investigations? If so, in what ways?
2. If improvements are needed, what changes are suggested?

### *Data Analysis:*

Responses to the interview protocol were analyzed using a research software program for complex textual data. Researchers developed findings based on content analysis procedures that organize rich text in concise and useable evidence.

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<sup>3</sup> A note about language: Throughout this report, survivors (or “complainants”) of sexual assault may be referred to simply as “victims” because this project is grounded in the criminal justice system and the usage acknowledges that a crime has been reported to a law enforcement agency. The word *victim* is not meant to be demeaning or judgmental. The project team recognizes that individuals have likely survived a combination of physical, emotional, and sexual trauma. As researchers, our aim is to honor every person’s choice in language to describe themselves and to name their experiences.

## **FINDINGS**

The assessment sought to answer two main questions.

### ***Research Query #1:***

#### ***Does the justice advocate position enhance sex crime investigations?***

In short, yes. Thus far, the JA position has had a positive impact on the work of investigators. Investigators described methods in which the JA 1) assists victims, 2) collaborates with investigators, and 3) makes system improvements. The investigators described the outcomes associated with these methods. Highlights from the focus group discussion are listed below.

#### ***1) Victim Assistance***

- Supports victim and members of their support system
- Attends to complex needs of victims who are in crisis, experiencing emotional distress, and have trauma histories
- Addresses victims' emotional needs and fears in a sensitive and compassionate manner
- Communicates well with victims and meets them on "their level"
- Provides information about the criminal justice process and referrals to other resources

#### ***Victim Outcomes***

- Increased victim participation in investigation
- Helped victims to feel safe
- Minimized re-traumatization
- Increased victim comfort to engage with law enforcement

#### ***2) Investigator Collaboration***

- Uses a transparent approach: asks the investigator for guidance and explains information shared with victim
- Shares information on victim reactions and the neurobiology of trauma
- Is flexible with time and accessible as in-house, full-time employee

#### ***Investigator Outcomes***

- Able to establish rapport with victims more easily
- Able to focus on their work and move the investigation along more rapidly
- Able to conduct more thorough investigative interviews with victims
- Enhanced understanding of victims' reactions
- Reported feeling like they are providing good service to victims when they utilize the JA

### **3) System Improvement**

- Connects and communicates with community members/groups during educational presentations
- Collaborates with HPD leadership to develop JA position (objectives, responsibilities, and target populations)
- Collaborates with working group to develop victim notification and information line protocols

#### **System Outcomes**

- Serves as a community liaison
- Positive interactions help to improve relationship between community and HPD
- Increased progress of Sexual Assault Kit Project

#### **Additional Information**

Investigators believe the JA is a valuable asset. The JA was described as “professional...she understands and demonstrates respect for law enforcement, but she also has the needed warmth and compassion for victims of sexual assault.” The other individual strengths of the JA are her strong critical thinking skills and proactive, victim-centered approach in ways that listen for understanding.

#### **Research Query #2:**

#### ***If improvements are needed, what changes are suggested?***

This position is new to the unit, so investigators admitted that not all investigators are utilizing the JA position. There was admittedly a hesitation to utilize an advocate because of the belief that that the advocate may hinder the investigative process. However, these barriers may be overcome with strong leadership and continued proven success of this position with sexual assault cases. Moreover, the position has potential to be utilized for victims who are particularly difficult for investigators to engage.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Investigators’ feedback on the JA position was overwhelmingly positive. At the time of the focus group, a CODIS Squad had recently been added to the Sex Crimes Unit to build capacity to investigate CODIS hit cases that resulted from the testing of sexual assault kits formerly held in storage or at the Crime Lab. Based on investigators’ feedback and the need to assist victims whose cases are being re-opened and investigated by the CODIS Squad, the IDVSA research team recommends the following:

1. Permanency of justice advocate position at HPD (Note: HPD leadership made the position permanent in April 2014).
2. Full integration of the justice advocate position into the Sex Crimes Unit.
3. Protocols that support the utilization of the justice advocate in the Sex Crimes Unit.
4. Continued evaluation of the justice advocate position toward its goals and objective.