Development of the Anonymous Reporting and Third Option Programs

This report discusses an initiative that was proposed by the Regina and Area Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) in Saskatchewan, in response to a noted gap in services for sexual assault victims. Sexual assault is a pervasive societal problem that continues to negatively affect individuals globally. In 2013, there were 21,311 sexual assaults reported to police across Canada (Boyce, Cotter, & Perreault, 2014). It is important to note that this is the number of reported cases, with research suggesting that 88% of sexual assaults are never reported to the police (Perreault & Brennan, 2010). Within Saskatchewan, the rate of violence against women is double what is recorded at the national level (Boyce, Cotter, & Perreault, 2014). It was reported that in 2011, Saskatchewan had the second highest rate of sexual assaults among the provinces, at 164 victims per 100,000 population (Sinha, 2013). The vast majority of victims do not formally disclose their sexual assault experience to an individual in a position of authority, or to individuals with whom they are close to and trust. Therefore, this indicates that many victims, perhaps most, do not receive or access informal support or specialized community support services that are available to help them heal, cope, and move forward with their lives following a sexual assault experience.

The Anonymous Reporting and Third Option Program give sexual assault victims the opportunity to disclose and/or provide evidence without committing to a formal report to the authorities. These programs allow victims to receive the benefits of accessing specialized health care and community support services, without forgoing their sense of autonomy when going through the reporting process. Moreover, these programs allow victims the time to decide what is best for them, eliminating the pressure to make a significant and impacting decision within the hours following the sexual assault.
The Anonymous Reporting Program is a choice for sexual assault victims who have considered reporting the assault to the police, but are hesitant to do so. This gives victims the opportunity to provide anonymous information to a designated community agency (e.g., Regina Sexual Assault Centre) about a sexual assault. Without disclosing the victims’ name, this information is passed onto the police for general information purposes. The Third Option Program will offer victims of sexual assault the opportunity to have evidence collected at a hospital emergency department, but to defer the decision about whether or not to report the incident to the police at that time. Rather than being restricted to “Yes, I will report” or “No, I do not want to report,” this provides the third option of saying, “Maybe, but I need time to think about it.” Forensic evidence is collected, documented, and stored, giving victims the opportunity to turn the evidence over to the police at a later date. Regardless of their decision about participating, victims will receive information, support, and/or health care services.

The development and implementation of both the Anonymous Reporting and the Third Option Program is important, as these programs offer non-threatening options for individuals during a vulnerable time. These program options allow victims to feel a sense of control and the ability to disclose when they are ready, while still ensuring that support services can be accessed. Although relatively new, one or both of these programs is currently being offered in provinces such as Manitoba, British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and the Yukon Territory.

In order to gather information on the process involved in developing and implementing these two programs to share with other interested jurisdictions and stakeholders, interviews were held with ten representatives of the SART team. The Regina SART team consisted of individuals representing the Regina Qu’Appelle Health Region, Regina Police Services, Regina Victim Services, Regina and Region (RCMP) Victim Services, RCMP “F” Division, RCMP White Butte
Detachment, Regina Sexual Assault Centre, Family Service Regina, Regina Regional Crown
Prosecutors Office, Regina Victim/Witness Services, Ministry of Justice, and Public
Prosecutions. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by seven questions. Each
participant was asked to reflect on and talk about:

- Why and how they became involved in working to implement the programs;
- Role played in planning program implementation;
- Outline of the process that the group underwent in bringing about implementation;
- Models and resources accessed for developing and implementing the programs;
- Barriers or obstacles faced and how they were overcome;
- Advice/suggestions for another jurisdiction attempting to implement these programs;
- Identifying the key players needed to put together a coordinated community response to
  sexual assault and make it work well.

**Results and Recommendations**

**KEY PLAYERS NEEDED**

Interviewees made it was clear that having representatives from community agencies and
high level government agencies at the table when developing and implementing both the
Anonymous Reporting and Third Option Program is imperative to creating an effective
community response to sexual assault. As one SART member stated, “Because of [our] unique
and individual perspectives, [we all] have valuable perspectives to add to the process, to the
debate, to the process of developing and implementing.” It was suggested that rather than having
an individual from every single agency, appointing one person from each “interest category”
would allow for a smoother and more cohesive process. For example, instead of having a
representative from four counselling agencies, one person may be selected to represent the views
of counsellors. The SART members indicated that when their process began, roughly 25 representatives from community and government agencies were involved, which created a level of dysfunction. Once a core group of 12 members was established, with each member representing one responder or service provider viewpoint, the group began to make progress.

To establish the core group, the SART team looked at the agency personnel with whom a sexual assault victim would commonly interact with when disclosing. At a meeting, the members brainstormed, stating, “if this is a normal file that comes in and goes from initial reporting right up until a court decision, who comes into contact with that person? Those are our key players.” It was decided that “medical is first and foremost, so someone medical [should participate].” Following medical personnel, “victims support because any victim going through a court process needs support,” so the team identified those agencies which offer support to sexual assault victims. It was mentioned that police services have victim services personnel, but there are also community organizations such as the sexual assault centre and domestic violence programs. The members then stated that “the reporting process [was examined] with the two police agencies, all the way through to court at the conclusion,” with one member summarizing the recruiting process by stating “so that’s right now who we have.”

- “At the time, everyone had their invested interest in the victim or the offence or the offender or the court process. And we wanted a more unified approach to it, to be able to say that the victim is properly supported throughout the whole incident and in court.”
- “You need somebody who understands what’s unique to the discipline and can speak to that discipline, not someone who is just casually involved.”
“From our growing pains, [we went to] getting commitment from [the agencies] who are going to sit at the table and identifying key players and going from there. There are so many victim groups out there that if you invite every single one of them to the table it just becomes too much.”

1) **Community Agency Representatives:**

The community agency representatives involved in this project provided the committee with a great deal of knowledge on responding to sexual assault and working with sexual assault victims. All community agency representatives conducted extensive literature reviews and gathered information based on their job positions and points of interest (i.e., medical, advocacy, counselling, criminal justice). The team then developed formal reporting forms, as well as agency protocols and policies for both pilot programs. Several members contacted agencies from other jurisdictions that were in the process of implementing or had successful programs, and asked questions regarding their experience with program development and operation. Many of these representatives were also the “middle person,” acting as a communication medium between their management personnel and the SART team. These team members represented the front-line workers, many of whom would be the first point of contact for victims of sexual assault.

- **Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) – Regina Qu’Appelle Health Region**
- **Counsellor – Regina Sexual Assault Centre**
- **Victim Caseworker – Domestic Violence Unit, Family Service Regina**
- **Victim Services Coordinator – Regina Victim Services and Regina Region Victim Services**
- **Police Officers – Regina Police Services and RCMP**
2) Government Level Representatives:

The government level representatives involved in this project provided the committee with a great deal of knowledge regarding legal and criminal justice aspects when working with sexual assault victims and perpetrators. Similar to the community agency representatives, all government level representatives conducted extensive literature reviews and gathered information based on their job positions and points of interest (i.e., prosecutions and policy analyst), and were involved in the development of forms and policies. Legal expertise ensured that, in addition to providing good support services, the long-term interest of justice would be protected. Several participants stated that having representatives from the legal community was crucial. Input from the Ministry of Justice, including Public Prosecutions, was invaluable to the advancing of the team’s objectives.

- Saskatchewan Crime Stoppers Coordinator – RCMP “F” Division
- Innovation and Strategic Initiatives Policy Analyst – Ministry of Justice and Attorney General, Government of Saskatchewan
  - This member also assumed the position of Project Coordinator, which helped move the project along in a timely manner.
- Regina Victim/Witness Services Coordinator – Regina Prosecutions Unit
- Senior Appellant Counsel Public Prosecutions – Ministry of Justice and Attorney General, Government of Saskatchewan
- Regional Crown Prosecutor Public Prosecutions - Ministry of Justice and Attorney General, Government of Saskatchewan

3) Suggested Members:

Participants were asked if the process would benefit from additional agency
representatives that were not currently involved in the Regina and area initiatives. It was suggested that the process may benefit by including a judge for additional legal input, an advocate for minority populations (e.g., First Nations counsellor or immigrant advocate) to enhance cultural awareness, and an outside researcher with background knowledge in research design to aid in evaluation of the programs post-implementation.

**STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS**

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the development process began with a series of meetings with “participants from different agencies and departments” representing community, government, and justice. Meetings were held approximately every three months, depending on committee member schedules and the stage of the project. It was noted by several participants that the group struggled at the beginning before the “core group” was established. One member stated that “it was slow going because there were so many people at the table and everyone wanted their individual mandates to take priority.” Once the group was able to “focus on who the key stakeholders [were]” and decide that “it’s not necessarily about [the] individual organization, but [about the] group as a whole,” the development process became more successful and progressive.

In addition to establishing a “core group” of agency representatives, engaging stakeholders was described as important to the development process. The SART members were asked to “give some thought to the target agencies and groups for the public education piece, what information should be provided,” as well as what strategies would work best to “get the information out there.” An awareness campaign was planned and the media portion of it was implemented.

Following the literature reviews and contact with other jurisdictions, the team was able to
tailor a protocol that would be most suited to the community. One member mentioned the importance of “[not] reinventing the wheel” and “using what’s already out there and what’s working, and [then adapting] it to your particular needs.” Several members mentioned it was essential to establish “reasons that the two programs were important.” It was concluded that offering “Anonymous Reporting and the Third Option would lessen the negative impact, and be conducive to the healing and recovery from the trauma.” This was an important step to ensure that all team members were united and motivated by the same goal. The development of principles established three priorities: safety, the opportunity to freely choose without pressure, and assuring accessibility, regardless of gender or lifestyle.

Considerable thought and time was put into developing the forms. One member indicated that documents were drafted based on “precedent from other jurisdictions.” Reporting forms were modelled after the Violent Crime Linkage System (ViCLAS), to ensure that the information gathered matched the national database. The group considered what other forms would be required, such as release of information forms.

Some drafted documents “were well into 90 pages,” so the drafting process took a large portion of time and commitment. Following this, the drafted materials were reviewed individually by the group members between meetings, with the goal of “coming back and providing responses, insight, guidance, and feedback.” This was an important step in the process, as all members viewed the documents from a different perspective. Some of the details that were reviewed included: 1) disclosure of victim’s names, 2) explaining the option of making a police report to victims, 3) maintaining security of stored kits for the Third Option Program, 4) age limits for participation, 5) timing of public announcements, 6) training procedures, and 7) program evaluation (e.g., gathering baseline statistics). The drafting process took a series of
meetings, with one member estimating that the drafting process took well over a year.

Once the documents were created, the SART team discussed how well the forms “fit within the processes of the various agencies involved.” This portion of the process was described as “dynamic and important.” The SART committee then role played different scenarios where the Anonymous Reporting and/or Third Option would be offered to a victim. This was described as “very, very useful” and resulted in fine-tuning of the protocol, forms, and processes. Overall, the development process involved a series of dynamic meetings, with the goal of “advancing the dialogue and reaching a point of being happy with the end result.” Throughout the process, representatives facilitated communication between their agency and the SART.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESS

Throughout the interviews, the SART members made several suggestions to consider when developing and implementing the Anonymous Reporting and/or Third Option Program. Below is a list of 16 suggestions that were described as important group features and imperative dynamics for success, with direct quotations illustrating the opinions of group members.

1) Important Group Features:

- **Recruit the “right” key players.** It is important to recruit the “right people” in order to have access to the “decision makers” within agencies.
  - “The people at the table have to be close enough to the front line that they know how things really work, but they also have to be high enough up in their organization that they are able to make either some decisions or have the credibility to get decisions made or get approval.”

- **Establish a “core group” of key players.** It was mentioned that working with too many members slowed the process and it became very difficult for the group to move forward.
“Rather than having a member from every one of those groups, let’s appoint one person that has that whole same interest in mind. And as soon as we did that and we took a step back and said ‘it’s not necessarily about my individual organization, it’s about this group as a whole,’ and we really started to make progress then. It was just that the initial group was so big and almost dysfunctional. We weren’t moving forward at all, and if we were, it was at a very slow pace.”

- **Consistency and continuity among group members.** This was described as helpful to get things accomplished, instead of having to start from scratch if a member needs to be replaced. Commitment from agencies involved and agency representatives at the start should be considered.

  - “It wasn’t until a group of us sat down and said ‘this is our core group and we’re going to do our best to make a commitment to this program well into the future,’ and then we could really start building on that.”

- **Collaboration. Make decisions together.** Although different agencies have different protocols and regulations that need to be followed, it is important to touch base with your committee and ensure that everyone is in agreement. There needs to be a “real collaborative spirit” among the different community and government agencies. All agencies involved need to work together and support one another through this process.

  - “Go into the planning phase with an open mind. We all bring our predispositions to the analysis.”
  
  - “Everyone has their own agenda and everyone has their own mandate, and when it comes to victims, they all want their mandate to be put first and it just became
too much. Whereas if we just had started with the smaller group, I think it would have been so much more productive from the very beginning.”

- **Motivate one another through the process.** Communication is vital and can enhance cohesiveness amongst the group.
  - “I think we’ve [done] a good job in that when one person felt like, ‘this is just way too much,’ there [were] always a couple of others saying, ‘…you can keep going!'”

- **Respect opinions. Compromise. Work together.** Each member is representing an agency with different values, protocols, and regulations. It is important to welcome suggestions as learning opportunities, and to approach dynamic situations with “how can this be improved,” rather than taking certain comments and suggestions personally.
  - “Everybody comes with their own little piece of the pie. I think we’ve worked really hard to try and understand each other’s perspective and respect each other’s roles. That’s really important because if you come with a very narrow agenda to a collaborative community response, it’s not going to work.”
  - “These were dynamic group meetings. The process was designed to reach a consensus among the members of the group, each with their own perspective and backgrounds and agencies that they come from. So I suppose one obstacle might be undergoing the process leading to consensus…lively debate is a good thing, listening to the others perspectives is a good thing, and working toward a resolution to issues amongst the group is part of that process.”
  - “I certainly observed first hand amongst the group a willingness to compromise on the detail issues in order to get to the final product.”
2) Strategies For Success:

- **Establish guidelines.** Before beginning into the process, it is important to establish guidelines of what the process will look like, what all members are expecting, and how the collaborative environment will be maintained.
  
  - “I would suggest that before you jump into actually developing a process that you look at what your principles are and what kind of environment you want your group to work in in terms of communication, consensus, and respect.”

- **Build consensus within your community.** It is important to have the support of individuals and organizations that are important to the process are invested and who will help make these programs a success.
  
  - “Make sure the community and the public are aware of who they need to talk to and who they need to go to.”
  
  - “You’re going to need buy-in from agencies likely at some point along the way and you don’t want to surprise them with the implementation after the fact, so it seems to me to be the best approach.”

- **Contact jurisdictions currently implementing and/or operating the programs.**
  
  Discuss their development and implementation process, as well as their successes and challenges. Do your homework and network with other agencies involved in the development and implementation. Do not re-create the wheel!
  
  - “Use what’s already out there and what’s working, and adapt it to your particular needs.”
Create an agenda. Implementing a meeting agenda helps to keep meetings on-task and aids in keeping track of what was accomplished during each session. This also ensures that individuals who were unable to attend the meetings can stay informed.

Hire a Project Coordinator. Consider hiring an individual or having one committee representative assume the role of Project Coordinator. It was stressed how important this was in terms of moving forward and accomplishing tasks in a timely manner.

- “To me, [having a Project Coordinator] was a really important piece. That somebody had the dedicated time, who could research and actually put documents together…if somebody is allowed and given the time, with the skills to dedicate to actually doing this, it really can move things forward.”

- “I would suggest that you have a coordinator, somebody that will organize meetings and do the minutes, all of the sort of admin and organizational stuff. Because it just makes it so much easier for everybody else that’s at the table.”

Factor time to go through the “chain of command.” Factor into the process that it takes a varied amount of time to work through the “chain of command” depending on the agency. It was noted that having support and backing from various agency supervisors was imperative for movement and progress to occur.

- “It takes a lot longer for privacy protocols to [work through the government], as opposed to a smaller agency where it’s [the representative], the director, and the CEO.”

Consider setting timelines. Agreeing upon timelines was suggested as a way to stay on schedule. However, it was mentioned that it is important to also allow for flexibility with your timelines in order to avoid becoming discouraged.
“Sometimes you need timelines to force yourself to stay on schedule, but the thing is be flexible with your timelines, otherwise you’re setting yourself up for disappointment.”

Be open to change. It is important to be flexible.

“If things don’t seem to be working, be open to trying to find ways that they can work. Be flexible to try and create the success.”

Do a practice run. Practice various scenarios with all members present to see how the whole process would play out when utilizing either program. This may lead to valuable changes.

“We just did a practice run with the core group. That was absolutely beneficial. I wish we had done that a little sooner because there were some suggestions that came out of it, just little things that came up in talking and going through the scenario. [I’m] thankful we did the scenario and addressed those, or that we were able to recognize and address most of those concerns before [the program was] actually [implemented]. If we hadn’t done that practice run and just unrolled it, I think there’s some victims that could have been looking at us thinking what is going on here.”

“Last week we went through some different scenarios, so we actually practiced. We ended up making three very minor changes as a result of that, so it was a worthwhile process.”

Stay focused on the end goal. Remember why you became involved in this process.
“Remember who we’re all working for and what we’re working for. It’s not for our own programs’ egos or importance. It’s to help those that are under great difficulties because of sexual assault.”

“I have a lot of victims that every now and then are like, ‘I had to report this,’ and they didn’t want to go to court, they didn’t want to do this. I think maybe had they had a little bit more time to decide for themselves, it would have been beneficial to have control over something that they had no control over in the first place.”

Conclusion

As Saskatchewan’s rate of violence against women is double what is recorded at the national level (Boyce, Cotter, & Perreault, 2014), and in 2011, Saskatchewan had the second highest rate of sexual assaults among the provinces (Sinha, 2013), it is imperative that reporting options be explored for victims of sexual assault. With research suggesting that 88% of sexual assaults are never reported to the police (Perreault & Brennan, 2010), offering victims the opportunity to disclose and/or provide evidence without committing to anything further is vital. This aids in ensuring that victims are aware of supports that are offered within the community and are then able to decide whether to access specialized health care and community support services, while eliminating the pressure to make a significant and impacting decision within the hours following the sexual assault. Developing and implementing both the Anonymous Reporting and Third Option Program within Saskatchewan is another step to better support victims of sexual assault and create a coordinated community response to this issue. Regina, Saskatchewan is the first city within the province to implement these programs. Sharing the learning’s from this initiative, specifically the step-by-step process used and the suggestions for success, allows for this information to be utilized by interested jurisdictions and stakeholders.
when considering the development and implementation of both programs. As one member mentioned, it is important to “[not reinvent] the wheel” and “[use] what’s already out there and what’s working, and [then adapt] it to your particular needs.” Moreover, tracking the progress of these programs over the course of implementation is important and will help determine the effectiveness of these programs. The SART committee has proposed an evaluation of both programs 5-months following the start of implementation. Overall, one cannot overstate the importance of creating a coordinated community response to sexual assault, which is only possible when a collaborative effort is adopted among community agency and government level representatives.
References

