

SAKI Media Relations: Key Considerations for Partnering with the Media

The media serve an important role in the SAKI effort by raising public awareness to the strides and successes under the effort. Whatever your agency's approach has been in partnering with the media, understanding the benefits to creating and maintaining good communication with the media is important.

Remember: Your agency has willingly embarked on this largely positive effort

Members of the media may ask uncomfortable questions about why these sexual assault kits (SAKs) were not submitted for testing. You can address those questions in ways that don't assign blame by acknowledging mistakes were made or that your understanding of these issues has evolved. You can focus on the fact that your agency is testing these kits and making things right with survivors, and changing the way sexual assault investigations will be handled going forward. However you choose to word this information, remember to draw attention to the positivity of the SAKI effort.

Try to view this as a chance to boost your agency's public image, educate jury pools about sexual violence, build upon and improve media relationships, and send a message to sexual assault victims that they matter.

What's your goal in partnering with the media?

To demonstrate to the community your commitment to public safety and to renew trust with all sexual assault victims.

How do you achieve this?

1. Be transparent. Public monies are being expended to test SAKs. Beyond that, transparency sends a message that your agency takes sexual assault and this effort seriously. Anything less than that sends the unintended message that you are hiding something or that you don't consider the SAKI effort a serious priority.

2. Foster accuracy. It benefits no one to circulate wrong information. Often that happens simply because the communication wasn't clear. Specifically, don't assume journalists understand all of the terminology and phrases

you use. Be proactive by pulling the background information and basic details together; don't wait until journalists call you to compile this information. Proper preparation makes the process smoother for everyone and ensures greater accuracy.

You acknowledge the importance of working with the media. So, what do reporters want?

1. Background, process, and time frames

Don't treat these elements as an afterthought. Reporters need these basics for accurate, thorough reporting; they don't want to get bogged down trying to untangle lingo or getting the steps right. Consider developing and approving a one-page media brief for distribution. The media brief will answer many of the media's questions, reduce the time you spend with media interviews, and improve accuracy in reporting.

Click [here](#) to view the SAKI Grant Background Template.

2. Testing stats

The media are going to periodically ask about the progress of the effort—for example, how many kits have been sent to crime laboratories, how many kits have been tested, how many DNA profiles have been generated, and how many hits there have been to DNA databases. Consider how to disseminate information and how often. Kentucky's Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence (SAFE) Kit Backlog site¹ updates weekly with tweets that contain information provided by the crime laboratory. This has saved members of the Kentucky State Police crime laboratory time with fielding media inquiries when all that reporters want are these numbers. Maybe the numbers can be added to your agency's existing web site and/or announced via Twitter.

3. Arrest notifications

Consider drafting a press release template specifically for SAKI-related arrests and other SAKI-related announcements. Again, *consistency and accuracy are key*. The release would ideally contain some background paragraphs explaining the SAKI process, the purpose, and so on. Make it easy for reporters to get the facts right. Also, sending out these

¹ www.Kentuckybacklog.com

releases lets reporters know you are going to alert them to new developments with SAKI cases, thereby potentially lessening the number of requests for updates. If reporters know the information is forthcoming, they'll be less likely to make repeated follow-ups.

Alternately, consider having a press conference to make your arrest announcements (perhaps for your first one only and/or any serial apprehensions). Getting face time with reporters is an easy way to begin (or continue) building a positive relationship with the media.

4. Features and other side stories

Think about the types of stories that you can pitch to the media, such as the following:

- ◆ Profiling the agency's victim advocate/special victims' detective
- ◆ Highlighting the survivor notification process
- ◆ Mentioning changes in policies
- ◆ Discussing national or specialized training that detectives/officers have attended
- ◆ Demonstrating tracking systems/CODIS (within the FBI's confidentiality parameters)
- ◆ Giving a tour of the evidence room or crime laboratory

In small and medium-sized communities, no event or information is too small to include in a press release. Small papers will often run releases verbatim and with unlimited space on web sites; things that wouldn't get printed in the past now get space online.

Communicating the message

Consider the messenger

Think about whether the traditional public information officer (PIO) or spokesperson for the agency is the right messenger for this issue. A coordinated effort with the PIO and the special victims' detective may be appropriate media contacts, or someone else who is deeply involved and is personally invested in the SAKI effort may be the best person to talk to the media.

The messenger must be well versed on the basics. He or she should clearly understand the testing process and terminology, as well as background on unsubmitted SAKs within the agency. Having the messenger summarize the national problem of unsubmitted SAKs, the purpose of the SAKI effort, and the desired outcomes is also beneficial. Again, accuracy is key.

Also consider the possibility of someone outside the SAKI grantee agency serving as the primary media contact.

Perhaps a community advocate organization involved in the periphery could field some of the inquiries; this organization does not need to be a grantee.

Use victim-centered, trauma-informed language

Building trust with victims and changing culture are part of the goal, as is educating jury pools. The media face big problems, including being overly cautious with the usage of words like "alleged victim" and "accuser," using language of consent and focusing on the victim's actions rather than on the perpetrator's, and enabling defense attorneys to cast doubt in jurors' minds about the accuracy of the victim's account based on the details published in articles. The way you communicate to the media can help shape the words they use. This guidance applies not just when talking to reporters, but in writing police reports and other documents that may become part of the public record.

Tips for Talking About Sexual Assault Cases:

Call it what it is—The media may use words like "alleged victim," but you don't have to use those words. You can say "victim" or "survivor," and if journalists quote you, they will quote you as such.

Avoid language of consent—In line with the previous tip, avoid using "soft" language of consent to describe criminal activity. Rape and sexual assault are not consensual sex or intercourse. Other words and phrases to avoid include *perform, engaged in, oral sex, kiss, fondle, caress, and panties*. Instead, use words such as *groped, forced his penis into her mouth, forcibly touched, and forcibly penetrated her vagina with his penis*.

Be especially aware of this when describing statutory rape. For example, instead of saying, "Investigators found text messages that indicated a sexual relationship between the teacher and student," say, "The perpetrator was sending predatory text messages to the victim." Don't be afraid of sounding too graphic.

Treat all crimes the same—A review of press coverage found inconsistent wording to describe non-sexual assault crimes and sexual assault crimes. For example, stories about arrests in burglaries and robberies refer to victims, not "alleged victims." Also, stories about non-sexual assault crimes rightly put the focus on the perpetrator, not the victims. Burglary stories, for example, don't usually emphasize that the victim left doors unlocked. Help the media be fair and consistent in reporting sexual violence by not being overly cautious with legalese and by putting the focus on the perpetrator's actions rather than on the victim's.

Conclusion

Engaging the media can be intimidating and uncomfortable initially, but it doesn't have to be that way. Numerous jurisdictions across the country have been successful in partnering with the media to convey to the public the positive efforts being made to work through unsubmitted SAKs, identify perpetrators, and solve cold case sexual assaults. The SAKI effort presents a unique opportunity to law enforcement agencies to bolster their public image by spotlighting the work being done to solve these heinous crimes and keep the public safe.

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