



Case Study

Improving sexual assault investigations



In February 2019, Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski created a Sexual Assault Investigations Task Force, in response to growing criticism about sexual assault investigations in Baltimore County. Criticisms included a federal lawsuit alleging mishandling of sexual assault cases, the use of investigative waiver forms and complaints from advocates that some department practices did not meet nationally accepted guidelines.

Sheryl was appointed by Olszewski as the Task Force Chairperson; as a police reform expert, she'd previously conducted reviews of the Baltimore City and Cleveland Police Department's sexual assault investigations. The Task Force was charged with examining investigation and prosecution policies, practices and training related to sexual assault complaints throughout the County, with the goal of making law enforcement more accountable and ensuring police and prosecutors consider the trauma that victims have experienced.

Their specific tasks included:

- Reviewing training for law enforcement officials involved in the response to sexual assault allegations, to ensure victim-centered and trauma-informed investigations.
- Reviewing data from sexual assault investigations to ensure proper tracking and accountability mechanisms.
- Assessing resources available for investigating sexual assault complaints and lab testing of rape kits.
- Researching and recommending implementation of national best practices. This research included the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Trauma Informed Sexual Assault Investigation Training, which provides law enforcement and multidisciplinary partners information on the neurobiology of trauma and investigative strategies for responding to sexual assault crimes in a victim-centered and trauma-informed manner.



Process & Outcomes

Consulting with the County Executive's staff, Sheryl recommended the makeup of the Task Force. The experts, stakeholders and decision-makers included a national policing expert on sexual assault investigative practices, the CEO of a local rape crisis center, the manager of a university forensic nursing program, the Deputy State's Attorney for Baltimore County, the commander of the Baltimore County Special Victims Unit and the president of a campus survivor advocacy group.

They began by creating an audit committee, a best practices committee, and a training committee to focus on specific issues. Between Task Force meetings, the best practices committee assessed local and national best practices and created a document summarizing their findings. The training committee developed and began implementing a trauma informed training plan. And the audit committee conducted an extensive audit of sexual assault cases and produced a detailed audit report.

Among the findings, the Task Force learned that County law enforcement rarely tested evidence from rape cases or filed charges in cases where victims delayed reporting; and police continued to consider whether or not victims resisted the sexual assault when pursuing investigations and prosecutions, even though a recent law had clarified resistance was not necessary to prove a crime had been committed.

As Chair, Sheryl was responsible for:

- Planning and leading all Task Force meetings and overseeing the workgroups
- Directing the audit workgroup and designing a standard questionnaire to be administered for all cases reviewed
- Scheduling dedicated audit sessions where audit team members reviewed over 200 sexual assault case files.

With the support of one staff person, Sheryl also created an online system to collect and compile the audit information. This system enabled the Task Force to explore the data objectively and identify



strengths and areas for improvement, invaluable information that helped inform many of the recommendations in the final report.

The Task Force concluded its work in September 2019 and released an [80-page report](#) publicly in October 2019; Sheryl was the primary author of the report. She solicited input from all Task Force members and circulated multiple drafts to build and obtain consensus on all recommendations and action.

The report contained audit findings, best practices review, a statewide assessment of SAFE (sexual assault forensic evidence) kit testing protocols and 23 recommendations for Baltimore County's sexual assault system, including trauma-informed training for law enforcement; regular audits; formal, written sexual assault investigative policies modeled after those recommended by the IACP; and stronger communication between police and prosecutors. Since the Task Force was comprised of those involved in decision-making and implementation, almost half of the recommendations were implemented by the time the report was released, and the remainder were in progress. (Other [information and resources](#) related to the Task Force is available for review.)