Communications personnel \(^1\) are usually the first contact that crime victims have with law enforcement and the quality of the interaction can set the tone for the entire investigation. Clearly, one of the top priorities for law enforcement, including communications, is to protect human life, yet this duty also includes reducing any further unnecessary trauma to victims of crime. Communications staff must be mindful of this duty at all times.

Despite the critical role that communications personnel play in responding to victims of sexual assault, they have traditionally been excluded from training in this area. Thus, communications personnel typically do not attend the kind of ongoing training that is needed to understand the complex dynamics of sexual assault crimes. For all of these reasons, we strongly recommend that all com-

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\(^1\)Communications personnel go by a number of names, including 911 Operators, call takers, dispatchers etc. We use these various terms interchangeably for the purposes of this module.
munications personnel—but especially those in supervisory positions—attend this type of training that has often been considered appropriate only for sworn personnel.

In general, communications personnel should address three primary goals: collecting information, dispatching assistance, and informing the victim. In addition, there are a number of special considerations to be taken into account when handling the sexual assault call.

**Collect Information**

Standard communication procedures generally include collecting the following minimal information:

- The caller's identity (name, address, a telephone number where the victim can be called back, and necessary identifying information including cross streets and apartment number).
- The exact location of the caller (i.e. what room she is in, and where she is located in the building).
- The extent of the victim's injuries and whether emergency medical assistance is needed.
- Whether the suspect is still at the scene.
- If the suspect is still at the scene, a description of any weapons used in the assault or any weapons accessible to the suspect should be obtained.
- If the suspect fled, his direction of travel and mode of travel.
- The identity or description of the suspect.
- Whether the victim requires a translator or other specialized assistance. In most cases, communications staff should not ask specific details about the sexual assault. The first responding officer will address this information in order to determine the specific acts/charges involved.
- If the victim states that she was raped, the communications personnel should NEVER ask if she consented or resisted because the victim might perceive these questions as disbelieving and/or judgmental. Rather, the responding officer will address this information after establishing a rapport with the victim.

In addition to these standard procedures for collecting information, we also recommend that communications personnel should address the following with sexual assault victims.

- If the incident just occurred, make every attempt to remain on the line with the victim. This can be very reassuring to the victim and allow additional information to be obtained. However, you need to be sensitive to the fact that the suspect may still be present and the victim might not be able to answer your questions or she may attempt to disguise the intent of her call.
- If the victim is unable to engage in dialogue, ask if she can at least put the phone down without disconnecting it to leave the line open. This allows the 911 operator to then continue monitoring the scene for signs of violence and other information that can be relayed to the responding officer.
• Keeping the victim on the line may also protect evidence from contamination or destruction, as it is unlikely that the victim will bathe or change clothes while talking on the phone.

• When questioning the victim, determine whether there is a second crime scene in order to appropriately dispatch police officers. For example, she might be calling from her home, but the sexual assault took place at a friend's house.

• If the victim disconnects from the phone line, the operator should follow standard procedures for a 911 hang up.

Special Considerations for the Sexual Assault Call

• It is extremely important not to judge what you hear from a sexual assault victim. Experienced law enforcement personnel know that anything and everything is possible. For the safety of the community and police officers, it is therefore crucial for the operator to suspend judgment and follow proper procedures for collecting information.

  For example, you might receive a call from a woman who states she has been sexually assaulted. However, you hear loud music in the background, indicating that there might be a party going on. Although this is possible, it is also possible the music was turned up by the suspect to prevent neighbors from hearing the victim's screams for help. Remember when taking a call from a sexual assault victim to collect all of the necessary information, suspending any disbelief or judgment you might be feeling. Sexual assault victims are often extremely sensitive to any doubt or blame, and if the operator communicates these to the victim, the consequences can be devastating.

• Depending on the circumstances of the assault, it is not uncommon for some victims to speak as if the assault is still occurring even though the suspect has already fled. In the victim's mind, the assault is often experienced as being in progress until she feels safe. Idiosyncracies such as this should be expected among sexual assault victims who are experiencing severe trauma and they should never be considered an indication of a false allegation.

• It is also not uncommon for a victim to report that she does not know where she is or whether she is injured. The victim may state that she has been "attacked" instead of identifying the assault as a rape. In addition, in cases where the suspect threatened to harm the victim if she called the police, the victim may be unsure whether to proceed with the call or to provide identifying information about the suspect. Patient, nonjudgmental responses from the operator can help the victim feel safe enough to disclose further information.

• Victims of sexual assault will display a wide range of reactions. Some victims might cry while others might appear angry or talk in a monotone. Operators must realize that there is no universal response to sexual assault and therefore that the type of behavior exhibited by the victim should never be used to judge the validity of her claim.
Crime victims are often unclear about what happened and how the incident would be classified criminally. This is especially true in cases of sexual assault. Many sexual assault victims believe an assault isn't rape if the offender was a husband, friend or acquaintance. Citizens are not usually instructed on the elements of criminal law and they hold the same misconceptions and stereotypical views of what constitutes "real rape" as the rest of society. For all of these reasons, it is critical that communications personnel use a patient, nonjudgmental tone to elicit information from sexual assault victims. It is not important at this point whether the victim labels her experience as sexual assault, but it is crucial that the operator collects the necessary information to relay to the responding officer.

Always remember: All calls should be handled following proper procedures regardless of your "gut" feelings about the validity of the call.

Dispatch Assistance

The first responsibilities of the 911 operator are to evaluate incoming phone calls, obtain the necessary information to determine the type of response needed, and then assign the priority of the call.

- As with any other call, any evidence of an assault in progress or an assailant still at the scene (such as screams, whispering, or an interrupted or incomplete phone call) should result in the call being assigned an immediate priority for responding officers.

- With these hot calls, the operator should promptly dispatch a responding officer to the victim?s location and to the crime scene (if different).

- Medical assistance should be also dispatched immediately if necessary.

Because the majority of sexual assaults are only reported to police after a delay of days or weeks, they will generally not be handled as a first priority radio call. At this point, the incident is usually no longer a life threatening emergency, however, the call should nonetheless be handled with the same professionalism and compassion as a "hot call."

Inform the Victim

Following departmental policies and procedures, it is critically important that the 911 operators keep the victim informed of every stage during the police response. Victims want to hear that the police are en route because they will not feel safe until a police officer has arrived at the scene.

Many victims feel panic and/or frustration when a series of questions are asked by a 911 operator who does not allow them to tell their complete story. Most people do not understand that the information they provide to communications personnel will be relayed to responding patrol units. Take a few seconds to explain that the series of questions being asked will not delay responding officers and that it will only help them to find the victim and respond in a safe manner.
• If suspect information and direction of travel has been broadcast to responding units, communications staff must ensure that the officer closest to the victim's location makes contact with her before checking the area for the suspect. Although locating the suspect is important, the first priority in a sexual assault call needs to be the safety and well being of the victim.

• The 911 operator should **ask** the victim if she has showered, douched, gone to the bathroom or changed clothes since the assault. Immediately advising sexual assault victims about what they should **not do** can create additional distress for victims who may have already engaged in one or more of these behaviors. Some victims might also feel embarrassed that they did not "know any better" and thus hesitate to reveal further information to the 911 operator. After asking the victim about these behaviors, the 911 operator should then advise her about the importance of maintaining fragile forensic evidence. This includes instructing the victim to not wash her hands, change or wash clothes, and not to clean up the scene where the sexual assault occurred.

• Even in the case of a delayed report, it is important to instruct the victim not to clean up the residence if it was the location of the assault. For example, the victim should be cautioned not to wash any sheets, mattresses, clothes, or even clean windows that might have latent prints.

• It is not uncommon for sex offenders to take insignificant items from the victim's residence to help him relive the assault at a later time. Therefore, the 911 operator may ask sexual assault victims whether any of her possessions are missing.

• If a drug facilitated sexual assault is suspected, and the victim states that she must urinate, the 911 operator should instruct the victim to collect her urine in a clean jar with a lid (or a secure container) and not to wipe her genitalia afterwards.

### Policies and Procedures

All law enforcement agencies should have a mechanism to record and retain incoming telephone calls, for a specified period of time. (A minimum of six months is recommended). These recordings frequently play an integral part in the investigation of a sexual assault because they contain spontaneous statements or excited utterances that may be used later as corroborative evidence.

In addition, it is important to recognize that patrol officers juggle a variety of tasks when responding to a call. They must be able to listen to their radio, note the address they have been dispatched to, and record all pertinent information regarding the suspect(s), victim, and crime scene. Consequently, much of the information obtained by the 911 operator is reduced to the absolute basics to relay to the responding officer. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that officers conducting a follow-up investigation of sexual assault obtain copies of communication tapes to include in their file for the prosecuting agency.

Communications personnel must keep in mind that their contact with a sexual assault victim is only the first step in a long and painful process with the criminal justice system. Communications personnel should thus be trained to ask only those question that are relevant to a proper police response, and to do so in a patient and nonjudgmental way. Specialized training is recommended for those critically important members of the sexual assault response team, in order to develop the skills ne-
cessary to successfully balance the demand of proper police procedures and victim safety and well being.