

Who's Helping Whom: Are Our Sexual Assault Response Protocols Working?

By: Brett A. Sokolow, JD

The prevailing model for victimization-response on most college campuses is to designate a small number of people who are well-trained in sexual assault victim's services, and to direct all victims and others on campus who need assistance to those well-trained individuals. Often, they are accessible 24/7 via cellular telephones, to provide assistance to all who call. The problem is, on so many of our campuses, very few people ever call. And mostly, we've resigned ourselves to the under-utilization of these resources and the reality that few victims of sexual violence will ever actually choose to report it. As I'm apt to do, I think it's time to question this model, and to challenge whether it is the best way to serve campus victims, and if more useful alternative models are available to us.

I think there is another model that bears exploration. It is based in a simple question: on your campus, who are victims most likely to approach for help, if anyone? On many of our campuses, the answer is not the well-trained members of our sexual assault response teams. The answer is: friends of victims, their roommates, their RA's, and often, trusted faculty members. Is it enough to simply direct all these people to bring victims to the trained campus resources? No. It isn't, simply because victims choose people they can trust, and more than anything else, they are concerned with confidentiality and having control over their choices. They don't want to talk to people who they don't know, and don't know they can trust. We continue to hear about fewer than a tenth of all the assaults that are impacting our students, and I want to propose an alternate model, which might serve victims better.

If we accept my assertion that the people most likely to be providing assistance and crisis services to victims are their friends, roommates, RA's and faculty members, why aren't we then providing training for these key people, so that when they are approached for assistance, they know how to help? This is one of those situations where we have tried to direct the flow of reporting, and victims have steadfastly swum in the opposite direction. I'm not suggesting that we abandon the sexual assault response team model, but I am suggesting that we broaden it, so that we can provide assistance to more than a handful of victims each year.

Now, among friends, roommates, RA's and faculty, some of these people will be easier to train than others. RA's on many campuses currently are trained in some level of victimization-response, but are mostly discouraged from providing direct support, in favor of referring victims to trained campus resources. Because RA's already receive training, providing them with victimization-response information would not be complicated. Faculty, too, might volunteer for some training, depending on their level of interest. It might be harder to impose training on faculty members, but we require sexual harassment training on many of our campuses, and training on victimization-response could be added to it. Rutgers University is a model. All 2000 faculty members receive victimization-response training annually. If Rutgers can do it, so can your institution.

Training friends and roommates might be harder. Volunteer trainings could provide information to those who are interested, but very few people who wind up needing to help a friend have any idea in advance that they will be called on in this way. There is no way for them to be able to anticipate the need for training. But, I do have an idea about how to make sure that just about

anyone on a college campus who needs critical information about sexual assault response can get it easily. Widely disseminate a high-quality, comprehensive campus sexual assault response protocol. Some campuses are creating their own. Many use the protocol that Katie Koestner and I have written, [A Model Campus Sexual Assault Response Protocol](#) (© 2000. NCHERM). I am a strong believer in comprehensive protocols.

The model that Katie and I have developed differs in some key respects from most campus protocols. First, the protocol contains checklists for very broad constituencies. It contains a section for Public Safety, Residence Life, Student Affairs, Health Services, Counseling Services, Faculty/Staff, Rape Crisis Centers and Friends/Roommates. This covers 90% or more of the people who victims might approach for assistance on a college campus, and can easily be adapted from its electronic format to provide critical information for support staff, student activities, coaches, or anyone else you would want to have this type of information. Further, the protocol distinguishes itself from most because it assumes no level of familiarity with the issue for those who implement it. Most protocols are written for people who are already trained in victimization response. Ours is more of a "Protocol for Dummies," if you will. Anyone can use it with only a quick reading.

What we learned, in talking with many of the people who are called on to provide crisis services on campuses was that they did not feel comfortable helping victims with options because they were uninformed. So, we started to collect information on the types of questions victims were asking, and the sort of information they seemed to be seeking from those they asked for help. We then expanded each of the protocol checklists to incorporate the ten or twelve most frequently asked questions by victims, and the answers they will need. Where the information needs to be customized for your campus, we have left a blank for you to fill in. So, for example, were a victim to approach a faculty member, and ask questions about prosecution, the faculty member would not need to be an expert on prosecution, but could look to the protocol to find out information such as who a victim needs to talk to in order to initiate a prosecution, how much it costs to hire a prosecutor (a frequent question!), whether the trial would be public, etc. All these things will help the victim to make an informed decision.

Each protocol gives some basic victimization-response tips for the user. And, for each protocol, most of the questions a victim might ask have been anticipated, so that just about anyone can quickly be enabled to provide a useful response. Too many times, a friend or faculty member has had to say, "I don't know, let's call someone who does." That works sometimes, but often can make victims uncomfortable. And if it does, the trusted helper might have to get back to them, and we know that sometimes we only have one chance to help someone, and after that they may not seek assistance again. We don't want victims to fall through the cracks, and a comprehensive response like this can help, and can also provide consistency of information across resources, if victims decide to contact more than one resource who is using the protocol.

Finally, this protocol can be used by friends and roommates. Some colleges give a copy to every student. While that might be impossible on your campus, it is possible to disseminate these protocols widely. Some colleges post them on the web. Others train fraternity and sorority leaders how to use them. Still others place a copy on the bulletin board outside the RA's door, so that anyone can grab a copy, as necessary, and anonymously. Some colleges will even place copies in the off-campus student center, or in the student handbook.