

Engaging Voices: A Community Driven Approach to Assessments

A Guide to Assessments for
Sexual Assault Response Teams

by

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This resource was adapted from *Listening to Our Communities: Fact Sheet on Community Assessments*, originally created by the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center in 2014 and further customized with examples and information specifically relevant to Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs).



Building a Responsive SART Through Assessment

Assessments are a crucial component of the work done by Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs), enabling teams to evaluate their effectiveness, identify gaps in services, and ensure that they are meeting the needs of victims/survivors.

Through this guide, SART members will learn how to design and implement assessments that provide valuable data, support evidence-based decision-making, and foster continuous improvement. Whether you are conducting a community needs assessment, evaluating the outcomes of a newly established protocol, or measuring service quality of first responders, this resource offers practical advice and guidance to help your team conduct meaningful assessments that drive positive change.

Exploring Assessment as a Tool for Change

Assessment is more than a method of gathering information. It's a strategic tool for reflection, accountability, and transformation. We engage in informal assessments every day, whether we're comparing prices and quality at the store or evaluating how best to allocate time and energy at work. These everyday decisions reflect our ability to weigh needs, values, and outcomes. In the context of SARTs, assessment offers a structured opportunity to ask thoughtful questions, learn from the results, and adapt to the evolving needs of your team and community. When approached with intention, assessment becomes a catalyst for community-driven systems change.

Community Driven Systems Change

Community driven systems change focuses on improving individual systems and structures that influence the response to sexual violence while also increasing collaboration between systems and engaging the community in efforts of change. Community driven systems change at its core is about engaging the community as active participants and leaders in reshaping how services are delivered.

Community driven systems change Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs) focus on:

Enhancing the Strengths of Practice, Policy, Procedures, and Collaboration

Involving community members, especially those directly impacted in identifying strengths in current practices, policies, and collaborations. This could look like focus groups, community advisory boards, or town hall meetings to co-create solutions to sexual violence response in the community.

Addressing the Shortcomings of Practice, Policy, Procedures, and Collaboration

Creating feedback loops where community members can continuously share their experiences with policies and practices. Ensuring that these voices influence decision-making.

Ensuring Support and Engagement for Victims/Survivors Throughout All Processes

Ensuring that services are trauma-informed, victim/survivor centered, responsive, and reflective of community needs. This means centering victim/survivor experiences and ensuring the support services are designed with their unique needs and voices in mind.

Continuously Improving as Time and Communities Change

Promoting a learning environment where systems, policies, and procedures are consistently re-evaluated based on evolving community feedback and outcomes.

Systems change can shape everything from frontline practices to agency policies and interagency coordination. SARTs engaged in systems change adapt their approaches to better serve victims/survivors and stay aligned with emerging promising practices and legislative updates across their state or territory.

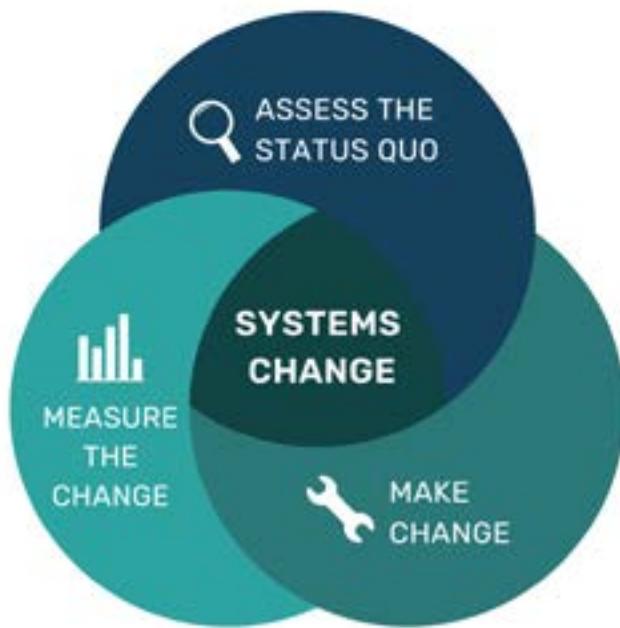
How SARTs Can Do Systems Change Work

One continuous improvement model for SARTs to follow is the Sexual Violence Justice Institute's (SVJI's) Phases of Systems Change. This includes three phases designed to guide teams as they work collaboratively to improve the response to sexual violence in the community.

Input Collection Examples

- Survivor Experience Surveys: Anonymous, trauma-informed surveys post-response.
- Community Listening Sessions: Town halls or focus groups with survivors, advocates, and service providers.

The Phases of Systems Change



Assess the Status Quo

Identifying current practices and gaps.

Examples:

- **Resource Mapping**

Take inventory of existing service providers by evaluating the availability and accessibility of resources for victims/survivors.

- **Victim/Survivor Feedback**

Bring in the voices of victims/survivors through various methods such as feedback forms, surveys, interviews.

Sample Survey/Interview Questions

- What services did you find most helpful during your recovery process?
- Were there any barriers you faced when accessing support services?
- What improvements would you suggest for the support services you used?

- **Community Engagement**

Conduct a community needs assessment to gauge perceptions of sexual violence response in the community.

New to Community Needs Assessment? Start Here!

If your SART has never done a Community Needs Assessment, here is a simple starting point:

- Listen First
 - Host listening sessions or use surveys to hear directly from survivors and partners.
- Use Ready Made Tools
 - [SART Toolkit Section 3.1 | National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)
- Center Survivors
 - Partner with culturally specific groups to ensure inclusive outreach.
- Apply What You Learned
 - Use findings to shape goals, training, and advocacy.

Make Change

Designing and implementing changes to meet identified needs.

Examples:

- **Improve Coordinated Response to Sexual Violence**
Develop/revise interagency protocol.

Protocol Examples

- Develop or revise interagency protocols to clarify hand-offs between law enforcement, advocacy, and medical providers.
- Implement warm referral practices where advocates can directly introduce survivors to other providers, rather than handing out contact information.
- Create a shared survivor intake form used across agencies to reduce repetition and re-traumatization.

- **Training Needs Assessment**
Identify training needs (knowledge/skills).

Identifying Training Needs Examples

- Survey team members to assess confidence in trauma informed response.
- Facilitate reflective dialogue using hypothetical cases to surface training needs (ie. "Where within our sexual violence response process could survivor safety have been strengthened?")
- **Program Initiatives**
Create programs/tools/resources.

Program Initiative Examples

- Develop a survivor resource guide with plain-language explanations of rights, options, and services.
- Create a team onboarding toolkit with protocols, contact lists, mission and vision statements. For more information on onboarding, please see [Developing an Effective Onboarding Process: Promising Practices for Onboarding New Sexual Assault Response Team Members](#).
- Design visual flowcharts of response pathways to help survivors and providers understand what happens next.

Measure the Change

Evaluating these changes to ensure they achieve the desired results.

For more information on methods of evaluation and additional tools, please see the [Victim Centered Evaluation Plan](#) and [Are We Making a Difference? Sexual Assault Response Teams Assessing Systems Change](#) resources.

Examples:

- **Barrier Analysis**
Identify and analyze barriers to the implementation of changes and use findings to make continuous improvements to protocols.

Strategies for Identifying Hidden or Unacknowledged Barriers

Use Survivor-Centered Reflection Prompts

- What feels “routine” or “efficient” in our process? Who might be excluded by it?
- What do survivors say feels unsafe, inaccessible, or re-traumatizing, even if we think it’s working?
- What voices are missing from our feedback and decision-making?

Gather Anonymous Input

- Use surveys, feedback forms, or listening sessions to collect honest insights from survivors, frontline staff, and community members.
- Include open-ended questions like “What makes it hard to access support?”
- Ensure responses are reviewed with a lens of humility and openness, not defensiveness.

Introduce Barrier Scenarios

- Share short, anonymized examples that illustrate how common practices can harm.
 - Example: A survivor was denied services because they hadn’t filed a police report.
- Invite teams to reflect: “Would we have seen this as a barrier before hearing this story?”
- Encourage teams to explore barriers beyond the obvious.

Normalize Disagreement and Discovery

- Acknowledge that team members may not agree on what constitutes a barrier.
- Frame barrier analysis as a learning process, not a judgment.
- Use facilitation techniques that allow for multiple truths and evolving understanding.

Evaluation Procedures

Survey, Focus Groups, Case File Review.

For more information on case file review, please see [What Do Sexual Assault Cases Look Like in Our Community? A Sexual Assault Response Team’s Workbook for Case File Review.](#)

For more information on focus groups, please see [A Guide to Focus Groups for Sexual Assault Response Teams.](#)

- **Continuous Improvement Model**
Monitor implementation of change.

Different Types of Assessments and How They Align with the Phases of Systems Change Work

Needs Assessment

This type of assessment pairs closely with Phase 1 of the Systems Change Model: Assess the Status Quo. This assessment helps identify the resources, training, and systemic changes needed to effectively respond to sexual violence in your community. This assessment aims to identify gaps in the current response, understand the specific needs of victims/survivors/stakeholders, and guide the enhancement of protocols.

- **Conducting a Community Need Assessment**

A community needs assessment is a tool designed to allow you to engage with your community in meaningful ways. It helps identify both strengths and limitations in the response to sexual violence, providing a path to reinforce successful elements while addressing areas that need improvement. It's important to keep in mind that assessment is not always about finding the bad, you want to make sure you are recognizing the good things as well!

Process Assessment

This type of assessment closely ties to Phase 2 of the Systems Change Model: Make Change because it focuses on protocol adherence, interagency coordination, response timeliness, and the function of your internal processes within the team. It is designed to examine and identify areas for improvement in the response process itself.

- **Conducting a Protocol Adherence Assessment**

Conducting a protocol adherence assessment is essential for ensuring that all members of the SART follow the established protocols consistently. This type of assessment helps identify whether protocols are being implemented the way they were intended to and can help highlight areas where improvements are needed. This type of assessment is more about how things are done, whether the processes are being followed correctly, efficiently, and according to the planned protocols.

- **Conducting an Interagency Assessment**

An interagency assessment evaluates how well the different agencies within your SART - such as law enforcement, healthcare providers, mental health providers, community-based advocates, prosecutors, are collaborating. Effective collaboration among different agencies is foundational to providing comprehensive, timely, and

victim/survivor-centered trauma-informed responses to sexual violence.

- **Conducting a SART Team Assessment**

Conducting a SART team assessment can be valuable for evaluating how your team functions. By considering factors such as capacity (who is able to do what tasks, and how can we ensure the workload is balanced), accessibility (is our work accessible to the community?), and logistics (does the meeting time, day, and location make it easy for everyone to participate?), you can gain insights into the effectiveness of your team's work.

The Sexual Violence Justice Institute (SVJI) suggests completing an assessment with your team every other year or more frequently if there has been a significant turnover. This might involve asking your teammates questions like, "Does a one-hour meeting every month work for you, or would you prefer a longer meeting every other month?" or "Would it be better to meet at the law enforcement office, a community center, or another local space that is more accessible?"

One effective way to carry out this assessment is by creating an anonymous survey. Anonymity encourages team members to be more open and honest about their needs, what's working well, and what changes they'd like to see.

Outcome Assessment

This type of assessment fits in well nicely with Phase 3 of the Systems Change Model: Measure the Change. An outcome assessment is evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the SART team's response to sexual violence in the community.

- **Conducting an Outcome Assessment**

A critical piece of SART work is identifying the effectiveness of implemented changes. It is important to know whether the changes made work the way they are intended to. This type of assessment focuses on the results or impacts of changes that were implemented. It is designed to evaluate the end results and measure the effectiveness of the changes in achieving its goals by looking at what was achieved and whether the desired outcomes or objectives are met as a result.

What Skills Do You Need to Do Assessments?

The assessment process starts with curiosity, adaptability, and a willingness to be open to experiences and perspectives that may differ from your own. Conducting meaningful assessments requires a combination of analytical, facilitation, and communication skills to ensure findings translate into actionable improvements.

Essential Assessment Skills and Examples

Critical Thinking

- **What it is:** The ability to recognize patterns, identify gaps, and evaluate information objectively.
- **Example:** A SART team analyzes response times and recognizes delays in victim/survivor access, prompting adjustments to intake protocols.

Data Analysis

- **What it is:** Collecting and interpreting data to assess trends and outcomes.
- **Example:** Tracking service utilization rates after implementing a new intake process to determine effectiveness.

Effective Communication

- **What it is:** Sharing assessment findings in a clear, engaging, and actionable way.
- **Example:** Presenting evaluation results through a visual dashboard to enhance stakeholder understanding and decision-making.

Facilitation Skills

- **What it is:** Leading discussions that encourage reflection and collaboration.
- **Example:** Guiding a multidisciplinary case review discussion to assess coordination effectiveness.

Adaptability

- **What it is:** Adjusting processes based on insights and feedback to improve outcomes.
- **Example:** Refining victim/survivor referral processes after feedback reveals areas of confusion.

Ethical Decision-Making

- **What it is:** Maintaining fairness, accuracy, and trauma-informed approaches in assessments.
- **Example:** Designing anonymous feedback surveys to ensure victim/survivor privacy while allowing collecting valuable insights.

What Do Assessments Look Like?

Assessments are designed to fit the needs of the community. They may look like electronic and/or written surveys, focus groups, victim/survivor group interviews, a larger scale assessment of the community's needs, or a review of statistics or data.

How Can Assessment Be Used?

Much like the cyclical nature of systems change work, assessments are part of a continuous improvement model.

Here are a few ways assessments can be used by SART teams:

Determine Areas of Strength/Limitation in Response

Assessments can help determine areas of strength or any limitations in the sexual violence response so that you can either reinforce the strengths to things you know are going well or address the gaps in areas that need to improve or are holding you back.

Examine Team Practices

Assessments can provide insight into how you do your work and your practices as a team. There may be areas where you find gaps in response and other areas where things are going well.

Investigate the Effects

Assessments can also assess the effects of the team and their work. This is typically a short-term outcome.

Demonstrate Impact of the Response

Assessments can demonstrate the impact your SART team's work has had on the community and the experience for victims/survivors of sexual violence who choose to interact with the system.

Who Analyzes the Data?

Some teams decide to analyze the data themselves. You may even be lucky enough to have a member of your team who loves data analysis! Another way is to partner with a third party or external agency to help with the analysis process.

For more information on data analysis, please refer to [Engaging Voices: A Community Driven Approach to Assessments, A Guide on Data Analysis for Sexual Assault Response Teams](#).

Ethical Considerations for Assessments

With any type of assessment or evaluation you are conducting, ethical considerations are paramount to ensure respect, fairness, and integrity.

Ethical considerations may include:

Informed Consent

Ensure participants are fully informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, benefits of the assessment, including how data will be stored, used, and shared.

Data Retention

Clearly communicate how data will be stored, for how long, and who will have access. Promising practice recommends retaining data, including audio, video, and/or written documents for a minimum of six months to one year.

- **Example:** “Data will be securely stored for 6-12 months (or per grant requirements), analyzed, and shared in aggregate to protect confidentiality.”

Share Findings

Where appropriate, provide participants with feedback about the assessment’s findings or outcomes. This helps you to build trust and rapport, and to demonstrate the value and impact of the information collected.

- **Example:** You can share your findings in various ways. You may decide to create a report or a new resource. You can also invite the participants back together to share the findings, so they have the option to ask questions, suggest improvements, or provide clarification, if needed.

Reimbursement for Time/Travel

Ensure that reimbursement is fair and equitable, considering the time, effort, and expenses involved for participants. This could include compensating participants for time spent completing assessments or for travel to and from assessment locations. If applicable, it is suggested to use the federal rate for mileage and hourly rates. This can be adjusted based on what your team feels is appropriate or has access to.

- **Example:** Some teams secure donations to help reimburse participants or provide grocery vouchers to a local store.

Only Gather What You Need

Collect only the information that is necessary to avoid re-traumatization.

Debrief Period

Allow time for debriefing after the assessment.

- **Example:** If your assessment involves feedback or input from victims/survivors, it can be beneficial to have crisis support services available for support, if needed.

Accessibility and Consistency

Ensure that the assessment process is accessible and consistent to all eligible participants, regardless of background or status. Avoid any form of discrimination in the assessment process, including participant selection, data interpretation, and reporting.

- **Some Questions to Think About**

- “Is this survey offered in multiple languages?”
- “Is the survey posted in a paper form in case people don’t have access to technology?”
- “If this is a virtual event, are accommodations available, for example, if someone needs ASL interpretation or closed captioning?”

Confidentiality

Protect participants’ privacy and confidentiality throughout the process to ensure that personal or sensitive information remains confidential. Participants are more likely to be honest and provide accurate information if they trust that their data will be kept confidential. This trust is essential for gathering valid and reliable data. Confidentiality also reduces the risk of data being biased due to outside influences.

Leveraging Evaluations to Drive Systemic Change

Assessments offer numerous advantages, particularly for SARTs. By conducting thorough evaluations, SARTs can uncover gaps in existing resources and ensure a more efficient allocation of the often-limited resources available. Additionally, assessments provide valuable insight into the specific needs of the community and your team, guiding improvements in the response to sexual violence.

This process not only facilitates seamless service referrals for victims/survivors but also strengthens the interagency collaboration essential for addressing the diverse needs of those affected. Ultimately, regular assessments are key to enhancing the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of your SART, ensuring that victims/survivors receive comprehensive, timely, and tailored support.

References

[Listening to Our Communities: Assessment Toolkit | National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)

For more information or guidance, please contact us at svji@mncasa.org or visit www.mncasa.org for more on our victim/survivor-centered work with Sexual Assault Response Teams.

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