

# At the Table: Listening Forums with Professionals, Survivors & Community Members

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**DEFINITION:** Listening forums are small group meetings that allow professionals to listen to and learn from the communities they serve. These gatherings are sometimes called listening circles, community conversations or focus groups.

## Why talk with three different groups?

Each perspective is essential to planning, implementing and evaluating sexual assault response and prevention.

- **Professionals** can tell you about people seeking services.
- **Survivors** can tell you about their experience in using existing services.
- **Community members** can tell you about people who are seeking services and those who are not.



**Hosting Listening Forums is especially important to sexual assault response as so few survivors seek services.** Only 5-20% of victims report to law enforcement and the majority do not seek mental health services nor medical care. (The “Justice Gap” for Sexual Assault Cases: Future Directions for Research and Reform. Kimberly A. Lonsway and Joanne Archambault Violence against Women. 18(2) 145-168.)

## Most victims are unknown to professionals, especially members of marginalized groups

– men, teens, people of color, persons who identify as LGBTQ, undocumented immigrants, people with mental illness or substance abuse, incarcerated people, and members of faith communities that strictly prohibit dating and/or sex among unmarried people.



**Why Now?** **People are speaking out against sexual violence.** Now is the time to engage their outrage, listen to their experiences and build partnerships to create change.

**Why Now? Innovative approaches are increasing the number and diversity of people reporting to law enforcement and seeking help after sexual assault.** One example of this is the development of non-investigative reporting options for survivors. This innovation allows survivors to provide law enforcement with information about an assault without requiring them to identify themselves or file a police report. This option is increasing the number of reports to law enforcement and increasing the diversity of persons utilizing this option.

- You Have Options. Developing this approach in six pilot sites, <https://www.reportingoptions.org/>
- End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) has Best Practice information online: <http://www.evawintl.org/PAGEID24/Best-Practices/Resources/NonInvestigative-Reports>

**Why Now? Survivors, whose assaults occurred years ago, are being contacted by advocates and law enforcement as their sexual assault forensic kits are now being tested for evidence.**

A national effort is underway to analyze evidence contained in kits that have never been tested. This means that dozens, sometimes hundreds, of survivors will be contacted regarding the testing results of their kits in cities around the country. Though all efforts are being made to do skillful victim notification, getting this news may be very difficult for survivors, especially when the offender has continued to commit violent crimes. For more information, see

- The Joyful Heart Foundation's END THE BACKLOG program, <http://endthebacklog.org/backlog/what-rape-kit-backlog>
- The Bureau of Justice Assistance, Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, [https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program\\_ID=117](https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program_ID=117)
- The Sexual Assault Kit Initiative with resources for federal grantees, <https://www.sakitta.org/>

**Listening Forums can accomplish much more than just information gathering.** If done well, they have the potential to build relationships between communities and professionals to:

- **Empower survivors**, their families and their friends to reduce violence and provide the next survivor with a better response
- **Connect with diverse populations** to bring their voices into planning for and implementing of change and evaluating progress
- **Educate the community members** about sexual violence so that they are better-informed voters, leaders and jurors
- **Create communication loops** for getting information out to communities and for hearing from them across time
- **Identify professionals, community members and civic and faith leaders** who are able to identify survivors,

- connect them with services and provide ongoing support
- assets and its formal and informal structures
- **Design prevention and intervention efforts** that build upon community

**How to Host a Listening Forum to Talk about Sexual Violence.** For more information on this, see the Office for Victims of Crime SART Toolkit at <https://ovc.ncjrs.gov/sartkit/>.