

TulSAKI- Tulsa Sexual Assault Initiative

Background information for media

How much money did the Tulsa Police Department receive and what is the purpose of the funding?

The Tulsa Police Department received \$1.5 million in funding as part of a grant in 2018 to conduct an inventory of previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs) for forensic testing, investigate and prosecute cold cases, provide support for sexual assault survivors, and develop a collaborative, community-wide approach to sexual assault in Tulsa.

Who awarded the funding?

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)'s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)—through the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI)—awarded the grant to the Tulsa Police Department.

Why is the DOJ distributing this money?

The money is helping cities, counties, and states test previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAKs); investigate and prosecute cold case sexual assaults; support sexual assault survivors; and reform the way jurisdictions handle sexual assault cases.

What is a sexual assault kit?

A sexual assault kit (SAK), also commonly referred to as a rape kit, is collected at a hospital or local rape crisis center as part of a medical forensic examination of a victim after a sexual assault. This might include swabs of any area where there was contact between the victim and perpetrator, as well as blood and hair samples.

Why is the SAK collected?

The SAK helps with the collection and preservation of potential evidence in a sexual assault case. Biological evidence—such as blood, saliva, and/or semen—can be tested to identify DNA from the perpetrator. Police and prosecutors may use this evidence to help them investigate and prosecute a case, and potentially solve other crimes.

What is the process for testing a SAK?

1. Law enforcement submits the SAKs to a crime laboratory.
2. The crime laboratory analyzes the biological evidence for the presence of DNA, which is unique to every individual (except identical siblings).
3. If DNA from a non-consensual person is present, analysts may use that DNA profile to confirm the identity of a known suspect.
4. Analysts may enter the DNA profile into a collection of criminal justice DNA databases, commonly referred to as the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS).

How does CODIS work?

CODIS enables federal, state, and local crime laboratories to exchange and compare DNA profiles from convicted felons and unknown perpetrators, thus allowing for serial violent crimes to be linked to each other and to known offenders. In some states, CODIS houses DNA profiles taken from individuals at the time of arrest. CODIS has a tiered structure such that eligible DNA data from local/state databases are uploaded and searched in the National DNA Index System (NDIS).

When a new DNA profile is generated from a SAK, it is entered into CODIS. If there is a match between the new DNA profile and an existing DNA profile in CODIS, it comes back as a “hit” to provide law enforcement with an investigative lead. Two types of hits can be returned:

- Offender. DNA profiles from individuals convicted of crimes match against a DNA profile entered from an unknown evidence profile, thus identifying a possible perpetrator.
- Forensic. Foreign DNA profiles from two or more crime scenes are matched together, but the source of the DNA profile remains unknown.

The new DNA profile also will remain in CODIS for future searches. Even if the new profile does not hit to a DNA profile currently housed in CODIS, the new DNA profile may hit to a DNA profile submitted to CODIS in the future.

Why were some SAKs not tested?

Across the country, SAKs were not tested for a variety of reasons, including:

- Poor evidence tracking
- Outdated or non-existent policies
- Bias resulting from gaps in knowledge about trauma and its effects on victim reactions and behavior after assaults
- Lack of resources and personnel
- Misunderstanding of crime laboratory processes
- Lack of understanding of the power of DNA databases
- Lack of understanding of the value of forensic evidence from SAKs

Law enforcement agencies and prosecutors across the country are working hard to learn new strategies and techniques for understanding victim responses to trauma and how to re-investigate cold case sexual assaults. The Tulsa Police Department utilized SAKI funding to hire a victim advocate for the Special Victims Unit, as well as provide training for law enforcement personnel. Dozens of agencies are committed to testing previously unsubmitted SAKs and taking a second look at unsolved sexual assault cases.

What are the benefits of testing all these SAKs?

Across the country, the effort to test previously unsubmitted SAKs is resulting in the identification of perpetrators, including many serial rapists and violent offenders. This is making our communities safer and bringing justice to victims. This effort also is restoring trust between the community and the criminal justice system.

Does testing unsubmitted SAKs cause additional trauma for victims?

Each victim is unique. Some may not want to be involved in this effort to re-open and prosecute these cases. Others feel that they are supported and want to seek justice. It is impossible to know in advance how a victim will react to the news that their SAK is being tested, but research shows that decisions about receiving SAK testing and case information should be made by the victim and not for the victim. In addition to hiring a victim advocate for the Special Victims Unit, the Tulsa Police Department has partnered with community organizations like Domestic Violence Intervention Services and the Family Safety Center to ensure sexual assault survivors are supported.

What else is being done to reform our response to sexual assault?

Testing previously unsubmitted SAKs is just one part of a broader effort to reform the way SAKs and sexual assault cases as a whole are handled. At the Tulsa Police Department, the grant money is being used to support a collaborative, community-wide approach to sexual assault. This includes partnering with community agencies through monthly meetings of the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART), providing training on trauma and victim behavior to law enforcement personnel, and updating policies and procedures to ensure all sexual assault kits are tested. In addition, the Lieutenant from the Special Victims Unit serves on Oklahoma's SAFE Task Force, whose recommendations on mandatory sexual assault kit tracking and mandatory testing of sexual assault kits were recently signed in to law by the Governor of Oklahoma.

For media inquiries, contact (918) 596-9168 or (918) 596-9331

For more information about our work related to the SAKI effort:

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