

# Improving the Response to Sexual Violence through SARTs

*Results reveal the core characteristics and resources needed for system change*

*Sexual Violence Justice Institute @ MNCASA | 2017  
Experts in the multi-disciplinary response to sexual violence.*

## Overview

Sexual assault response teams (SARTs) are community-level initiatives that coordinate and improve the local response to sexual assault through multidisciplinary collaboration. If SARTs focus on changing the system response to sexual violence, they can improve victim well-being and the criminal justice system. When these SARTs are properly equipped and supported, they have a positive impact and continued influence on the system response to sexual violence. STOP Administrators can support SARTs through strategic leadership and making technical assistance and training accessible.

The purpose of this exploration was to provide critical information to STOP Administrators on SART 'ecology' that identifies the characteristics and resources teams need to be successful in system change improvements. These findings will help STOP Administrators understand and influence the environment in which SARTs develop and thrive. It will increase knowledge of the elements of a healthy SART 'ecosystem' (the interplay between



## DEFINITION OF SARTS INVOLVED IN SYSTEMS CHANGE:

A multi-disciplinary team that is focused on and has achieved an improvement in the response to sexual violence that gets into policy, protocol, or routine practice. The improvement promotes victim well-being, offender accountability, and ultimately, community safety in the short or long run.

SARTs and the climate, organizations, and resources) as one that fosters SART effectiveness in varied local settings.

Seventeen teams were engaged from Wisconsin, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Oregon, Colorado, Minnesota, Pine Ridge Reservation (SD), and Coeur D’Alene Reservation (ID) in a consensus-building process during site visits to collect data. These SARTs varied in structure, governance, composition and demographics. Each team met our definition of a SART that is engaged in system-change efforts. See page 3 for a more detailed description of the methodology.



*To make it work, you really do need to respect the work of the people on the team with you....We had to balance power. Law enforcement can seem like the most powerful player on the team and that was hard for others. There were a lot of conversations. It was painful.*

*The higher ups in law enforcement didn't know the community agencies and didn't see the value of collaborating at first. SART members had to push their higher ups. Law enforcement members had enough credit to cash in and influence their endorsement of our protocol. The District Attorneys had political capital and individuals at their agency pushed it. They had faith in the members of the team.*

**-17<sup>th</sup> Judicial District SART, CO**

## Findings

Five themes emerged as important elements of the ‘ecosystem’ of SARTs engaged in system-change work. The characteristics and supports identified by successful teams are woven throughout these themes, illustrating the strong web in which teams thrive. The themes are detailed below along with recommendations for STOP Administrators. These SARTs:

### Hold a shared vision and model of the system response

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A comprehensive and shared understanding of how the system currently operates is important because it guides the development of SART principles and protocols. This shared mental model creates a framework for decision-making in cases. By emphasizing a “big picture” focus, teams stay motivated and attentive to the broader response and purpose. Working in collaboration brings together different parts of the system response, developing cross-disciplinary knowledge and understanding. Each organization within the system has its own unique experience and positional perspective, contributing invaluable insights into current operations and envisioning how the system response can improve.

### Foster a culture of learning

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SARTs must confront a variety of complex ever-changing situations. A learning culture emphasizes understanding each situation, documenting successes and setbacks, identifying change strategies, and applying that information to continuous improvement. The team and all of its member organizations must embrace and encourage this type of learning for it to occur and ultimately sustain the SART.

### Benefit from diverse membership and strong relationships

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The multidisciplinary emphasis of systemic change requires members to think beyond the boundaries of their own institutions and disciplines. Different organizational actors possess different networks, assets, and points of leverage. By centering and sharing their perspectives around the common objectives of assisting sexual assault victims/survivors and improving the criminal justice system, team members foster a sense of shared purpose, trust, and momentum for change.

## Require multi-level leadership

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While many SARTs have a designated leader or facilitator, responsibility and power are equitably distributed through the team and their organizations. Team members who collaborate on a particular systemic issue must consult with their respective organizations for approval and implementation, which ensures that all team actions gain the support of the member organization. This support is pivotal to the overall success of the systems response.

## Strive to understand benefits and gaps and work towards improvement

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SART members and their organizations work to understand the broader experience of victims/survivors in the systemic response to sexual assault. Continual assessment and evaluation reveal what is and is not working, thus illuminating deeper issues that may not be apparent to any single system responder.

## Recommendations

SARTs face a variety of challenges in developing and maintaining their effectiveness. Campbell and Greeson<sup>1</sup> have described SART collaboration as a “shifting dynamic process” (2013, p. 139). By widening our view of the relevant factors involved in SART development to include the ecosystem in which they exist, this project addresses SART efficacy across the variety of conditions found in a given community. STOP Administrators have a significant role to play in setting and influencing conditions in which SARTs grow and perform. Regardless of a state or territory’s current level of engagement in SART work, opportunities exist for influencing the ecosystem that supports them.

### *In supporting STOP sub-grantees, consider the following:*

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- Fund SART-related work that includes the following components: cross-system collaborative projects, evaluation, technical assistance, and opportunities to connect and develop leadership
- Establish expectations of SART structure as multi-disciplinary and focused on systems-change work, rather than individual cases
- Require that SART collaborations obtain signed agreements with leadership in law enforcement and prosecution
- Fund trainings on how to develop and sustain a SART

- Fund the cataloging of all state or territory SARTs to establish communication linkages with and between all SARTs, whether or not they are grantees. Develop methods for SART leaders to share standards of excellence and discuss strategies

### ***In STOP Implementation planning:***

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- Add a SART technical assistance provider or SART member to the planning committee
- Host one or more meetings with SART network leaders and local SART members. In addition to discussing what individual SARTs may need, discuss the current supports available to SARTs to identify useful elements and gaps
- Use of a portion of the STOP set-aside to fund local or state-level SART related projects

## **Detailed Description of Methodology**

The information from a literature review was shared with 17 SART teams from across the U.S. that have successfully achieved changes in their system response to sexual assault. Using the Multi-Attribute Consensus Building method, teams used their “lived experience” to rate the importance of each characteristic to their success and discussed any differences in perspective. Then the ratings were synthesized to identify the “most important” characteristics and supports of these teams. The SVJI STOP Administrator Advisory Committee and state-level technical assistance leaders provided feedback on the findings and stories were collected from teams to help illustrate items that were identified as highly complex.

## **Resources**

SVJI explores relevant topics and provides technical assistance and training across the country for STOP Administrators, state-level leaders, and SARTs. To access the full report and issue briefs on other critical issues go to: <http://www.mncasa.org/stop-administrators-project/>. Contact SVJI with questions or for technical assistance at: [info@svji.org](mailto:info@svji.org) or 651.209.9993.



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