

Key Takeaways from a Landscape Assessment on Standardized Forensic Medical Exam Documentation

Overview

The overall goal of RTI International's Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Advancing Hospital-Based Technology to Support Victims of Interpersonal Violence (OVCAT) project was to improve the care offered to victims of interpersonal violence, using technology to document injuries and enable multidisciplinary collaboration beginning with the forensic medical exam.

As part of this goal, RTI completed a **landscape assessment to understand how technology can support forensic exam teams in the documentation of interpersonal injury**. This landscape assessment explored the processes of forensic exam teams to standardize documentation of forensic exams, including both kits and forms used to document injury and evidence. This study focused on the *tools and forms* used to document injuries during forensic exams, not the processes and procedures used to review and document those injuries.

Our Approach

1. Conduct a **survey** of forensic exam team members, as well as program managers and directors, to establish the current state of forensic exam documentation standardization and technology use.
2. Complete **one-on-one follow-up interviews** with forensic exam team members as well as program managers and directors who had experience with the standardization process and/or used technology to aid in this process.

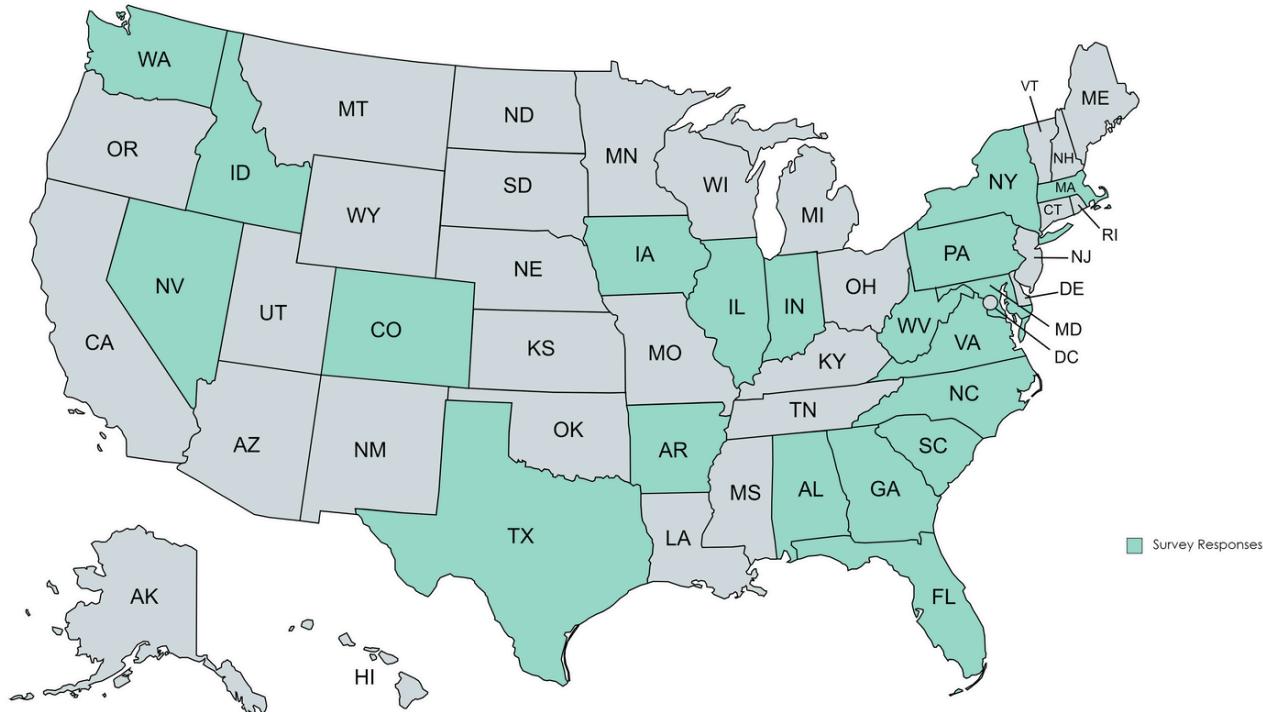
Participants

Participants were recruited by leveraging the network and relationships of our partners at the **International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN)** to distribute the survey via email to members of their organization. We also identified additional networks, listservs, and contacts of forensic exam teams across the nation to share information about the survey.

31
online survey
respondents

9
follow-up
interviews

20
states
represented



Key Takeaways



PERSPECTIVES ON NATIONAL STANDARDIZED KIT AND DOCUMENTATION PROCESS

- While the majority of survey respondents favored national standardization of sexual assault evidence collection kits, the most common recommendation from interviewees was to have **a national minimum documentation standard** that could be implemented across states but also account for regional and cultural differences.
 - Participants felt that **nurses and examiners who practice in multiple states would have a better understanding and familiarity** if there were national minimum standardization with common components across all states.
 - This could also ensure **standard medical care and evidence collection** regardless of where the assault occurred or where a victim presented for an exam.
- Participants cautioned against a kit being **too prescriptive or restrictive**, or encouraging that mindset.
 - Documentation that accompanies the kit should not restrict an examiner's ability to think outside the box and **be responsive to patient history and other needs in a trauma-informed way**.
 - A standard kit would also need to take into consideration the **differing capabilities of crime labs across the country**.



BENEFITS OF STANDARDIZED DOCUMENTATION

Victim Benefits

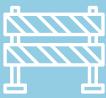
- Standard forensic evidence documentation can help mitigate disparities in examiner familiarity with evidence collection to **ensure that patients receive comparable care and evidence documentation regardless of where they present for an exam**.
- Interviewees expressed that standard documentation would ensure that the level of detail they collect is sufficient to **pursue prosecution more easily and successfully**.



BENEFITS OF STANDARDIZED DOCUMENTATION

Provider Benefits

- Standard documentation would be **easier for training purposes** and would cut down on time needed to train examiners on different forms between different programs or hospital systems.
- Standard documentation would **help examiners feel prepared** for conducting an exam, which would be especially useful for novice examiners and examiners working in areas that conduct fewer exams.
- By having a standard form, **examiners could trust the form to guide the exam** and ensure no critical information is missed. This also could benefit providers when testifying on cases in court by ensuring the information is thorough and easy to find when referencing.



CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IMPLEMENTING THE STANDARDIZATION PROCESS

Provider Challenges

- **Establishing consensus** among team members, hospital requirements, and multidisciplinary stakeholders was the most common challenge highlighted by survey respondents.
 - Interviewees expanded on this challenge by noting that communication among examiners and crime labs can also impact what team members document during an exam, how they document it, and how much buy-in team members have.
- A standard kit might **inhibit a provider's ability to "think outside the box"** and consider other patient needs throughout an exam, particularly for examiners who are newer in their role or do not do exams often.

Victim Impacts

- **Length of the standardized form** could be a drawback. If it's too long, it could impact the rapport between the victim and provider. If forms are too limited in scope (i.e., lacking certain questions or spaces to include information), medicolegal information could be omitted.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING TECHNOLOGY TO AID IN EVIDENCE COLLECTION DOCUMENTATION

- Overall, participants were generally apprehensive about documenting forensic exams in **an entirely technology-based format**.
- **Photos and the need for enhanced security of images** were a driving factor in the use of technology in forensic evidence collection documentation. However, current practices for the privacy and security of photos were still a major discussion point among participants.
- Most participants expressed a belief that **current technology has system limitations** failing to meet (1) the level of detail needed for a forensic exam and (2) the security precautions that would be needed to store a forensic exam chart.
- Although some participants noted that electronic medical record systems can have subscription levels or modules to conduct a forensic medical exam, often they are **incredibly expensive** and have unclear **security frameworks** needed to isolate the forensic documentation from the rest of the medical record.
- Logistics surrounding **trauma-informed use of technology** to document forensic exams emerged as an important consideration.
 - Victims of sexual exploitation may be particularly sensitive to photographs uploaded during an exam.
 - Placement of tablets, laptops, and wall-mounted computers should be considered when using technology to document an exam.

RTI International is an independent, nonprofit research institute dedicated to improving the human condition. Our vision is to address the world's most critical problems with science-based solutions in pursuit of a better future. For more information about our work across victimization and criminal legal response, visit: <https://www.rti.org/practice-area/justice-research-and-policy>.

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