

HOW TO BUILD A TRAUMA INFORMED CULTURE AT YOUR AGENCY

WRITTEN BY: Lt. Rob Fanelli & Capt. Mike Schentrup



Building a Trauma Informed Response Culture at your Agency

Published on April 15, 2020



Mike Schentrup

Captain and Owner/Lead Trainer of Advanced Police Concepts

Progressive law enforcement agencies are changing the way they investigate sexual assaults. Research conducted in the area of neuroscience continues to explain the severe effects a traumatic event can have on brain function. Law enforcement has begun to adapt and change their perspectives on rape victim's behavior and memory following an attack. With new information gathered from the science of trauma, we have learned many things about why victims of sexual violence are disorganized in their thoughts and recollections and why suspects are not.¹ For example, through research conducted on brain function during a traumatic event we have been able to explain why victims of rape are more likely than not to delay their report to law enforcement. Delayed reporting and other behaviors that result from the shock of being sexually assaulted should never be used to discredit a rape victim. We have learned that initial empathy shown toward victims not only goes a long way toward gaining their cooperation, it also begins their healing process and empowers a victim to see the legal process to the end.

As law enforcement officers, we have a responsibility to the survivors of sexual violence to understand the results of rape victimization. As Chiefs and Command Staff, we have the

responsibility of ensuring there is an organizational culture of understanding and empathy toward victims of sexual violence. Your immediate response might be: “Of course we take sexual violence seriously”; but do you? Are you willing to place your agency under the microscope of a victim centered approach? A real in-depth look of how we, as law enforcement, still handle sexual violence cases would show we do not do a great job. In the era of the #MeToo movement, law enforcement leadership has a responsibility to be truly self-reflective and know that we can and must improve. The good news is there are ways to do this.

The advent of trauma informed response created an opportunity for law enforcement to grow and change. Many law enforcement agencies have embraced the concepts of a trauma informed response, however, have these changes been superficial or simply an attempt to gain positive attention? Do these concepts and ideas truly permeate the culture of your agency? Is there a trauma informed response from the beginning to the end of all your calls to sexual assault? These are the questions which agency leaders must ask themselves:

- Do you have a “champion” for these changes and is he or she effective?
- Patrol officers are the initial point-of-contact; are they being trained?
- Are your civilian personnel being trained?
- Is your middle management carrying on the change?
- What is your message to the public when you discuss your sexual assault cases? Are your Public Information Officers included on the training and have an understanding of the goals?
- Are you conducting routine external sexual assault case audits?

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss each.

1. Leaders of police organizations are instituting training and new procedures/ policies in the way they investigate sexual assault. Your agency must have a “champion” of these changes. The champion should be law enforcement officer and he/she should have credibility with your law enforcement personnel. A lot of times, the champion has had a change-of-heart because the science of trauma has personally affected them. Maybe they had an “Aha” moment while listening to a lecture on trauma informed response. The testimony from someone who has changed their beliefs is always powerful and convincing. These champions understand the normal biases of law enforcement officers (and humans) because they have been there. They also are familiar with counter arguments because they have overcome them. He/she knows the many hurdles that must be jumped to keep the momentum of the changes and can have a positive impact on the agency as a whole. Normally this champion will naturally occur. As a leader, you must recognize, embrace and fully support them and use your champion to move the changes forward.

2. I truly believe there is nothing more important to the investigation of sexual assault than the initial patrol response. A 2007 study by Karen Gelb revealed that only 19% of sexual violence victims actually report the crime to the police; however, only 13% of the time law enforcement officers actually complete an incident report. So even after the survivor gains the strength to call law enforcement, about 6% of the time we refuse to take a report, minimize the crime, or talk them out of reporting altogether.² Is this acceptable? Our front-line officers are the initial point-of-contact with survivors. They must be trained on trauma informed response, including showing empathy and have a “Start by Believing” attitude.³ Let the survivor know they are safe, get a victim advocate involved early, and finally, never accept a refusal to prosecute. Survivors are testing the response from law enforcement and the initial response by us may determine whether they continue cooperating with the investigation. The patrol officer has a chance to start the trust building with the survivor that can carry through the entire investigation and potential prosecution. A believe first attitude leads to trust and trust leads to empowering a victim to move forward.
3. Civilian personnel can have a profound effect on the culture and effectiveness of your organization and therefore should not be left out of the conversation. Recently one of our evidence clerks was pushing for shorter retention periods at our department for non-reporting sexual battery kits. In their argument they stated, “if they were actually raped, they would have reported it”. Remember, this is an attitude change and thought shift and must permeate your entire agency.
4. Once law enforcement executives decide to move to a trauma informed response to sexual assault, how do they ensure these changes are sustained. I wrote in 2017 that middle management is the key to sustaining these changes.⁴ Why is this? As with most organizational changes, lieutenants and sergeants are the key to moving the message from talk to action and they are responsible for maintaining the changes. But why?

First, because division commanders are normally responsible for the division of labor between detective squads so they must ensure Special Victims Unit (SVU) detectives have the time needed to work each case to its fullest. Second, division commanders and SVU supervisors are responsible for holding their detectives accountable. They must ensure the investigation is as thorough as possible. Third, bosses are responsible for ensuring proper training for new detectives and continued advanced training for current detectives. Working sexual violence cases is complex, and training can be time consuming and expensive. A commitment to training is critical. Lastly, criminal investigation commanders are the only ones who can hold the entire agency accountable. They are the ones who sit in at command staff meetings. They are the only ones who can confront other parts of the agency when they are not doing everything they can to embrace this new way to investigate sexual violence cases. What is the external message your agency is providing the community? Initially, as law enforcement executives embrace these changes and begin the trauma informed training, they normally make it a news event by releasing it to the local press. However, is there any

follow-up? Recently, our agency released to the press a victim of sexual violence recanted her account of being raped. (For those of you wondering, she was not charged with a crime.) We did this in a very trauma informed way, but this was not the way it was reported by a local radio station. Their headline was, “Rape victim admitted she made up the entire story.” Data shows us that only 2-8% of reporters of sexual violence make up the account.⁵ It is quite rare. The story was released by our agency to ensure the community knows they are safe, but the message to actual sexual violence survivors is overwhelming. Survivors are apprehensive of reporting to begin with, so why do we need to make reporting any more threatening. Law enforcement executives must be aware of what we release to the media, since most of our citizenry have the same gender biases that we as law enforcement are trying to overcome. I highly recommend including your PIO on advanced training to fully understand and be able to speak in an overall victim centered manner. If this is not possible at your agency perhaps a conference between the “champion” at your agency and the PIO prior to a press release.


6. Lastly, how do law enforcement executives ensure their agency is conducting sexual assault investigations in a trauma informed and unbiased manner? The answer is external case audits. This can be done by local sexual assault victim advocates or other local law enforcement agencies. Or if this is not possible, allow an external audit to be conducted by a sworn member at your agency, who may be a prior SVU supervisor and who is well thought of and trained in trauma informed response. We must hold ourselves accountable and this is one important way.

In the last several years, progressive law enforcement organizations across the world have implemented changes in the way they investigate sexual assault. In 2016 the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, hosted *Looking Ahead: The National Sexual Assault Policy Symposium*. The two cornerstones of the advancements toward improving sexual violence investigations discussed at the symposium included evidence processing and a trauma victim centered response.⁶ It is the responsibility of law enforcement leaders to safeguard the hard work put into changing the investigative culture and to ensure it does not revert back to the traditional processes and biases that dominated our profession even ten years ago. Organizations must have a champion of those changes and train their patrol officers and civilian staff in trauma informed response. Their middle managers must be focused on continuing the change and the agencies must safeguard their external messaging is bias free. Finally, law enforcement leaders cannot be afraid to ask outsiders to audit and review our sexual assault cases. As in anything else, leadership is key to these things. Make your organization the model of sexual assault response.

CITATIONS:

1. Dr. Rebecca Campbell, *The Neurobiology of Sexual Assault*, <https://nij.gov/multimedia/presenter/presenter-campbell/pages/presenter-campbell-transcript.aspx>

2. Dr. Karen Gelb, *Recidivism of Sex Offenders*, Research Paper, State of Victoria, Sentencing Advisory Council, January 2007
3. *Start by Believing* campaign, End Violence Against Women International, <http://www.startbybelieving.org/>, August 2011
4. Mike Schentrup, *How Leaders Can Sustain Changes to Sexual Assault Investigations*, <http://lawofficer.com/exclusive/how-leaders-can-sustain-changes-to-sexual-violence-investigations/>, April 2017
5. *False Reporting*, National Sexual Violence Resource Center, https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Overview_False-Reporting.pdf, 2012
6. *Looking Ahead: The National Sexual Assault Symposium*. National Institute of Justice. <https://www.nij.gov/topics/law-enforcement/investigations/sexual-assault/Pages/national-sexual-assault-symposium.aspx>. February 2017

 **Biography:** Captain Mike Schentrup is currently a Bureau Commander for the Gainesville (FL) Police Department, where he has worked for the last 23 years. The majority of his career has been spent in investigative units, including major case detective, gang and burglary unit sergeant, and ultimately the division commander for detectives. Captain Schentrup has a Bachelor's Degree from the University of Florida in Sociology, with an emphasis on Criminal Justice and has recently attended both the Police Executive Research Forum's (PERF) Senior Management Institute for Police and IACP's Leadership in Police Organizations course. He has three previously published articles on sexual violence response, including "The Transformation of a Major Case Detective" (American Police Beat, 2017); "How to Sustain Sexual Assault Investigation Changes" (LawOfficer Online, 2018); and "Initial Officer Response to Sexual Violence" (Chief of Police Magazine, 2018). He presented at both the 2018 and 2020 End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) conference and the 2019 ICESA Sexual Assault and Human Trafficking Conference in Indiana. Captain Schentrup has taught for ten years in various investigative fields and is the owner/ lead trainer of Advanced Police Concepts, LLC (AdvancePoliceConcepts.com). He is also an adjunct master instructor for law enforcement for the Florida Council Against Sexual Violence (FCASV) and recently was interviewed extensively for a video presentation developed by the FCASV produced as a roll-call training video for patrol officers across Florida. Captain Schentrup is a current member of the Florida Statewide Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). In 2019, he was invited to join the Expert Cadre for EVAWI.

 **BIOGRAPHY:** Lieutenant Rob Fanelli is currently the Criminal Investigations Division Commander at the Gainesville (FL) Police Department. He started his career with the Gainesville Police Department in 2003. His experience

includes policy writing and compliance, detectives, and he was a member of a number of street crimes units focusing on street level narcotics, robbery, and burglary. Lieutenant Fanelli has a Bachelor's Degree from the University of Florida in Criminology. He was a board member of the Criminology and Law Honor Society, Golden Key Honor Society and graduated with honors. He went on to receive a Masters in Business Administration from Saint Leo University. He currently works with IACP on sexual violence training.

Published by



Mike Schentrup

Captain and Owner/Lead Trainer of Advanced Police Concepts
Published • 4mo

Lt Rob Fanelli and I wrote this article describing our journey and challenges while trying to build a truly trauma informed law enforcement agency. We make mistakes and run into barriers everyday, but we are determined. [#lawenforcement](#) [#traumainformed](#) [#police](#) [#sheriff](#) [#policeofficers](#) [#investigations](#) [#evawi](#) [#cops](#) [#evawi2020](#) [#justice](#) [#investigation](#) [#advancedpoliceconcepts](#)