Start by Believing and SEEK THEN SPEAK

Reducing the Devastating Harms of Sexual Victimization and Preventing Future Violence in Our Communities
The impacts of sexual violence are often severe and long-lasting, even lifelong. Many sexual assault victims experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidal behavior, and chronic physical health problems.\textsuperscript{1} The devastating repercussions then ripple out through families, to affect whole communities. Yet one of the most tragic aspects of sexual victimization is that it becomes a primary risk factor for being sexually victimized again in the future. Research estimates that women who have been sexually assaulted before their 18th birthday are twice as likely as others to be sexually assaulted after age 18.\textsuperscript{2} The question is therefore how to prevent this cascade of harmful impacts on survivors and their loved ones, and also how to prevent future violence in our communities.

\textbf{I can hardly imagine how different my life would have been if I had been believed the first time I tried to tell. I was sexually abused by my biological father as a very small child and through the years, tried to tell in various ways—verbally, non-verbally, you name it. But I was dismissed and doubted for years.}

As is often the case with children who are sexually assaulted, I was later sexually assaulted several times as a teen—when I tried to tell, I was told, “I’m sure it was an accident,” and “He didn’t mean anything by it.” That disbelief has affected me throughout my life.

\textit{Filled with self-doubt and self-loathing, I attempted suicide three times in my 30s, and after that final attempt woke up in the ICU furious and angry and I knew I needed help.}

- Elizabeth
Following a sexual assault, victims make a variety of decisions, including whether and how to seek help. Most (58-94%) seek help informally from friends and family members. This is especially likely among adolescents, whose first disclosure of sexual assault is typically made to a friend or family member, not a formal service provider.

**Negative Responses**

Unfortunately, many victims receive negative responses when they first disclose their sexual assault. This can include being doubted, blamed, or shamed, and research indicates that these negative responses can be separated into two types: Overtly hostile reactions and “unsupported acknowledgments,” where loved ones may acknowledge the sexual assault but fail to provide a supportive response. Both types of negative responses can have harmful effects on survivors, including increased posttraumatic stress, phobic anxiety, and delayed recovery. Worse, these harms compound based on the number of negative responses survivors receive. This means it is worse for victims to tell someone about their sexual assault and receive a negative response than to never tell anyone at all. Perhaps not surprisingly, survivors who receive negative responses are also less likely to disclose to others or reach out for help, denying them support from loved ones and services like health care, counseling, or police.

**Professional Responses**

Yet negative responses are not limited to loved ones. About half of all sexual assault victims rate their experience with formal support providers as unhelpful or hurtful, and these victims have worse physical and psychological outcomes as well. What do these professional responses look like? From health care providers, negative responses can include treatment that is “cold, impersonal, and detached.” From law enforcement, this can include discouraging survivors from reporting, or
questioning them about things like their prior sexual history, what they were wearing, or whether they “responded sexually” to the sexual assault.10

When victims don’t report their sexual assault, or withdraw their engagement based on negative responses, this creates a number of additional harms. First, law enforcement is unable to investigate the sexual assault and prosecute offenders. Victims are also left with unresolved trauma, and many perpetrators will go on to commit additional crimes.11 The devastating harms of repeat perpetration then escalate, beginning with these new victims and their loved ones, and extending to whole communities.

Improving Responses

With supportive responses from loved ones, victims can benefit enormously. Victims describe positive responses as being listened to, given emotional support and autonomy, not being blamed, and being encouraged to talk about the sexual assault.12 In fact, the two specific behaviors that seem to have the most positive effect are having someone to talk to and being believed.13 Sexual assault victims who receive such positive responses experience a range of improved outcomes, including fewer PTSD symptoms and better recovery.14 They are also more likely to further disclose and reach out for help, both to law enforcement and other crucial services like health care, advocacy, and counseling.15

The same is true for professional responses. Sexual assault victims who receive positive responses from professionals (like health care providers, victim advocates, and police officers) experience a wide range of benefits to their well-being.16 One of the most helpful responses is a simple acknowledgment or validation of the victim’s experience: “I’m sorry this happened to you,” or “I’m glad you told me about this.”

All this points to a need for public education and professional training – to ensure survivors receive supportive responses that set them on a path toward holistic healing and enable their engagement with law enforcement to help prevent future violence.

Start by Believing

In 2011, we launched Start by Believing to achieve these ambitious goals. Start by Believing (SBB) is a public awareness and action program, created to ensure survivors are treated with compassion and respect when they disclose to a friend or family member, or any other community member, including responding professionals.
The Start by Believing program has three components: the first is adopting the philosophy of Start by Believing on an individual or organizational level, and committing to respond supportively when survivors disclose abuse. Since 2011, tens of thousands of people have taken a personal pledge to Start by Believing, demonstrating the power of collective engagement to create change for survivors and their loved ones.

The second component is communicating to survivors and the community through campaigns declaring “We hear you, we support you, and we will Start by Believing.” Campaigns may include community presentations, press conferences, intensive social media outreach, or personal pledges collected from residents committing to Start by Believing survivors. Campaigns may also provide community members information on what to say and do when a loved one tells them they’ve been hurt by interpersonal violence. Most programs focus their efforts on a heightened push around Start by Believing Day, a global event taking place on the first Wednesday of April each year.

One survivor told us that after a Start by Believing presentation, her father who had blamed her for her assault because of where she was and how she was dressed at the time, came to her and apologized. He told her he believed her, and that she had not deserved that treatment from anyone no matter where she was, what she was wearing, or what she was doing.

- Wendy Silva, Victim Advocate in Punta Gorda, Florida
The third component of Start by Believing is **equipping organizations to respond more competently and compassionately to sexual assault survivors**. In other words, Start by Believing is not just a set of words, or a personal pledge that individuals can take. EVAWI helps organizations translate the philosophy into victim-centered, trauma-informed policies, protocols, and everyday practices. We do this by developing training materials, and other concrete resources that agencies can adapt for their own use, and delivering them with our various live and online programs. We then consult with individual agencies and community collaboratives to support their implementation of the SBB philosophy. It is a wraparound approach for communities we will expand in the future.

**Proposed Activities**

There are currently more than 700 Start by Believing campaigns to date, but there are so many more communities where survivors are not believed and supported.

EVAWI amplifies SBB’s impact by providing in-depth assistance to individuals and agencies across the country, helping to tailor their messaging, materials, and outreach to better serve the intersectional needs of the communities they engage. We connect agencies that are already active in the SBB movement with those seeking to launch their own initiatives. We also link new partners to EVAWI’s professional resources, including live and online training programs, and concrete templates and tools. Finally, we add powerful survivor stories and portraits to our [Survivor Voices](#) webpage.

> They were amazing and heroes in my eyes. I wasn’t told to get over it. I was heard and treated with love, understanding and compassion, and that was powerful. I’ll just say again, I WAS BELIEVED! It made all the difference in the world.

– Cresta
Impact for Survivors

Each day, sexual assault survivors in communities around the country are weighing whether to reach out for help, whether they'll be believed. So many survivors decide the risk isn't worth it. If each community reaches responding professionals and members of the public through the Start by Believing campaign, countless survivors who will now hear the powerful message: "When you tell us you've been hurt by sexual violence, we will believe you. We will get you the help you need. We will help you seek justice."
End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) works to improve professional responses to sexual assault. Yet most sexual assault victims do not turn to professionals first. Instead, they reach out to friends and family members, steeling themselves as they utter those heartbreaking words, “I was raped.” Our Start by Believing campaign prepares professionals and loved ones to react supportively when a survivor discloses, so victims get the help they need. But what happens next?

SEEK THEN SPEAK offers a way for sexual assault survivors and support people to gather information, explore options, and take action – including beginning the process of reporting to police. This interactive web-based tool was developed with grant funding and pilot tested in several diverse communities. Both survivors and professionals expressed how much promise it holds. With additional outreach, we will be able to help more survivors to pursue justice and healing on their own terms.

Support Isn’t Reaching Survivors

We know that our support systems aren’t currently reaching most survivors. Less than one half of sexual assault victims access health care and about one-third use mental health services. This means most survivors never experience the benefits these crucial services can offer for their physical and mental health, as well as practical needs like housing and education. Fewer than one in five report their sexual assault to law enforcement, which means police have no way to hold sexual assault perpetrators accountable and prevent future attacks. However, even with a report, officers need detailed information from victims to conduct a thorough investigation. Unfortunately, police officers are frequently ill-equipped for this task, without sufficient training and skills in effective victim interviewing. In addition, law enforcement agencies often lack timely access to the interpretive services and assistive communication devices they need to serve diverse populations and conduct effective interviews and investigations.

Barriers to Access

Services reach even fewer survivors among communities that have been systemically underserved or marginalized. This includes survivors of color, who must decide whether they can trust service agencies to meet their needs. Survivors with limited English proficiency may not have access to information in their primary language, and they may question whether their voice will be heard without effective interpretive services. Immigrant survivors and LGBTQ survivors, as well as survivors who are incarcerated, unhoused, or lacking economic resources may also hesitate to trust law enforcement and service providers, despite higher rates of sexual assault victimization.
For survivors with disabilities, such concerns may be further compounded by barriers of physical mobility, limitations affecting cognition or communication, and sometimes total dependence on caregivers who may be the very people sexually abusing them. \(^{24}\) Alternative solutions are needed to increase access to justice and services.

**SEEK: Explore Options**

SEEK THEN SPEAK is an interactive website now publicly available on any digital device, at [SeekThenSpeak.app](http://SeekThenSpeak.app). It offers sexual assault survivors and their loved ones a way to gather information, explore options, and begin reporting to police, if they choose.

In SEEK, survivors explore options for crucial services like medical care, victim advocacy, and reporting to police, as well as information about their rights as a crime victim. SEEK answers real-world questions survivors are likely to have about these options, including how to initiate them, whether there are any costs involved, and whether they can bring a support person with them.

This online tool may be especially helpful for adolescents and young adults, since technology is often their primary means for gathering information and engaging with others. \(^{25}\) It can also provide vital access for any survivor who is isolated by geography, culture, homelessness, incarceration, fear of discrimination, or threat of violence. SEEK paves the way for survivors to connect with service providers, increasing access for short-term crisis assistance and long-term help to recover from sexual assault. \(^{26}\)

**SPEAK: Begin Reporting**

If they choose, survivors can then begin the process of reporting to police by completing a detailed, self-guided investigative interview in SPEAK. Interactive questions were crafted by national experts to reproduce an interview conducted by a law enforcement officer who is well-trained in the neurobiology of trauma and best practices in sexual assault investigations. Prompts guide survivors through careful documentation of the evidence most critical to the investigation.

The interview also serves an educational function, explaining why questions are asked, how the information will be used, and what the survivor’s rights are throughout the process. Survivors are repeatedly reminded that they can provide as much or as little information as they choose, and they can remain anonymous if they want. This means that in addition to capturing a detailed statement of their sexual assault, the process leaves survivors better prepared to participate in a follow-up interview and investigation conducted by law enforcement.
Create PDF Report

SEEK THEN SPEAK is available to users in many different languages with built-in Google Translate API accessible on any digital device (laptop, tablet, mobile phone). The program can then generate a PDF report which the survivor can:

1. Save for now
2. Email to the police department
3. Print, either to give to police or simply to store while making a decision, or
4. Give to a sexual assault advocacy center to submit on their behalf.

The program does not save information; users clear all data from their device after report generation.

Increasing Access

No other tool exists that gives survivors such extensive information about their options, rights, and services, and offers a way to begin reporting to law enforcement at a time and place of their choosing.

Police officers, health care providers, advocates and others can offer SEEK THEN SPEAK for victims to use whenever it is convenient, including while they are waiting for services or when interpreters are unavailable. Translation is browser-based, so the survivor completes the interview in their own language, increasing access for survivors to pursue justice and healing.

There are people in neighborhoods who are being sexually assaulted and will never call 911 for help. They don’t want a patrol car showing up at their house, and they’re not going to walk into a police station. But maybe with this tool, they’ll be more willing to let us know what happened. I want to build trust with residents, so we can keep people safe.

- Deputy Chief, Chicago Police Department
Impact for Survivors

Survivors have already told us how valuable they find SEEK THEN SPEAK, especially the opportunity to complete a self-guided interview at their own time, place, and pace.

Pilot Testing

In May 2022, Kansas City became the first community to offer SEEK THEN SPEAK for public use. The tool was posted on the Kansas City Police Department (KCPD) website, and promoted in TV news stories. Early experiences using the tool with survivors were very positive, as described by Victoria Pickering, a victim advocate in Kansas City:

Almost a year later, Pickering described SEEK THEN SPEAK as their "go-to tool" to help survivors prepare for interviews with law enforcement. Sex Crimes Sergeant Erica Oldham at the Kansas City Police Department echoed the same favorable sentiment, highlighting the importance of the tool for preparing survivors and assisting investigators:

With future outreach, SEEK THEN SPEAK will offer countless sexual assault survivors the opportunity to pursue their own healing and potentially hold offenders accountable within the criminal justice system, thereby preventing future attacks in our communities.
Endnotes


universities (HBCUs).


Among other general information about what victim advocates are, and how to access services, survivors are advised that “You can find a victim advocacy center by calling RAINN, the national sexual assault hotline, at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673). Or you can search for victim advocacy centers by state or zip code. Just go to the RAINN website using the button below. The RAINN website also offers helpful information about healing, safety planning, and talking to loved ones about your assault.”