



The Power of Information Technology at Work: West Virginia to minimize or eliminate untested/lost sexual assault kits and improve evidence collection

***Category: Improving State Operations***

**State of West Virginia**

Division of Justice and Community Services:

Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System

Project Initiation: August 2015

Project Completion: July 2016

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## Executive Summary

Sexual assault is a horrendous crime—victims suffer greatly. Additionally, as if the violence inflicted isn't enough, victims must also endure the physically and emotionally difficult process of providing evidence. After surviving a sexual assault, a victim may seek medical care and choose to have any evidence left on his or her clothes or body collected by a healthcare professional. The collected evidence is placed in a kit, which is one investigative tool that may help police and prosecutors identify the offender and find connections to other pending cases.

The sad reality is that sometimes kits are misplaced and go untested—thereby limiting the ability of law enforcement to find that justice for victims of sexual assault and sexual violence. West Virginia is proud to be part of a big team that has figured out a kit tracking solution that works in West Virginia utilizing the power of information technology because even a single missing kit is too many.

In West Virginia, sexual assault evidence collection kits are distributed by the West Virginia State Police Forensic Laboratory to authorized healthcare providers around the state. Before the implementation of the new system, distributed kits were recorded in a spreadsheet, and there was no mechanism in place to record when a facility used a kit and sent it on for forensic testing.

Additionally, the system previously in place for kit evaluations was a web-based application with the system and backend data hosted on a server not owned, managed or accessible by the state. The hosting and maintenance of the system changed multiple times over the life of the system, and the agencies experienced many difficulties over time getting changes made to the interface and getting data out of the system due to this instability and lack of true ownership. The system also lacked a kit tracking component.

The new web-based Application provides a consolidated, centralized solution that enables the tracking of sexual assault kits from the time they are shipped to a healthcare facility to when they are collected and returned for forensic testing. The system also collects invaluable feedback on the quality of the collected kits that will be used to identify potential areas of improvement and training opportunities to ultimately improve evidence collection.

The new system is the first in the nation to combine kit tracking and kit evaluation functionality into a single, consolidated and centralized solution that is accessible by all stakeholders involved with the tracking, collection and evaluation of sexual assault kits.

## Concept

Per the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, which is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, on average, there are 321,500 victims of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States, which equates to an incident every 98 seconds. Additionally, the Rape Kit Action Project Steering Committee, which was founded in 2013 and is made of representatives from national leaders fighting to end sexual violence, estimates there are more than 100,000 sexual assault kits nationwide that are lost – they are unaccounted for and have not been tested. In West Virginia alone, there are approximately 1,200 cases of reported sexual assault each year and approximately 1,500 lost kits.

Lost and untested kits are not unique to West Virginia. It is a problem faced by many states. Recognizing the need to combat this longstanding problem in West Virginia, using guidance and recommendations from the West Virginia Sexual Assault Forensic Examination Commission, the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services, and the West Virginia Hospital Association, the West Virginia Division of Justice and Community Services and the West Virginia State Police Forensic Laboratory partnered with WV.gov to develop the Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System.

The new West Virginia Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System represents a major process innovation for the state. It provides a breakthrough for law enforcement agencies, crime labs, and the criminal justice system, and most importantly—for the victims themselves whose legal cases often hinge on the results of these kits. It is a web-based system that provides a consolidated, centralized solution that enables the tracking of sexual assault kits from the time they are shipped to a healthcare facility to when they are collected and returned for forensic testing.

The system enables authorized crime lab users to manage kit information that tracks what kits are sent to a facility and when. Once a facility collects a kit, the facility updates the system in real time to indicate the kit was collected and that it was sent for forensic testing. The ability to track the location and specific details of kits at all times helps to ensure that each kit is properly tested and none get lost in the process.

The system provides another valuable function – it also collects feedback from crime lab users on the quality of the kits collected by facilities after forensic testing has been completed. The kit evaluation data collected is used to identify potential areas of improvement, leading to training opportunities that can ultimately improve evidence collection processes and procedures. And improvements to evidence collection can help to increase conviction rates of sexual violence offenders in West Virginia.

## Significance

The Application provides a major breakthrough to the longstanding problem of lost and untested sexual assault kits which is a problem faced by many states and not unique to West Virginia.

The implementation of the new system aims to eliminate untested and lost sexual assault kits and to improve the collection of kits until the sexual assault kit backlog in West Virginia is zero and the state leads the nation in the quality of collected kits.

Given that the components of a sexual assault kit, as well as the processes and methods for collecting a kit are very similar from state to state, any state could easily adopt the system and realize its benefits, just like West Virginia has. Furthermore, the normalization of the components of sexual assault kits nationwide combined with the implementation of this system in each state has the potential to eliminate untested and lost kits and reduce the +100,000 sexual assault kit backlog to zero nationally.

It is fully expected that West Virginia's innovative example will be followed by multiple states in the near future.

## Impact

The Application combines two features into a centralized web-based solution that provides a single point of entry for all stakeholders and results in a major process innovation for the tracking and evaluation of sexual assault kits by introducing simplicity, convenience, and accessibility where complication and disconnected processes are the status quo. The Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System provides a solution to the longstanding problem of lost and untested sexual assault kits and will help to improve evidence collection to ensure that all kits collected are of good quality.

### Features

- Centralized, web-based solution
- User-friendly interface with built-in validation
- Enables kit tracking and kit evaluation
- Provides robust kit tracking and kit evaluation reporting

### Benefits

#### *Centralized, web-based solution*

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*Major process innovation for the tracking and evaluation of sexual assault kits*

The system provides a breakthrough for law enforcement agencies, crime labs, and the criminal justice system, and most importantly—for the victims themselves whose legal cases often hinge on the results of these kits.

*Benefits victims, health care providers and West Virginia’s criminal justice system*

By knowing where a sexual assault kit is at all times, and learning from the feedback gathered on the quality of kits collected, the Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System not only benefits West Virginia’s criminal justice system and our healthcare providers, but the victims themselves.

Results

Since the launch of the new system, 959 kits are being tracked in the system. Of those, 402 have a known disposition and 110 kits have been evaluated. The kit disposition specifies whether the kit was sent for testing, if it was used for training, if it was not used or destroyed, or it is in stock at a facility. Before the implementation of the system there was no way to determine these numbers. Additionally, data from the kit evaluations can be easily generated and evaluated for a given period of time or by individual facilities and is actively being used to focus training in the areas identified as most problematic in kit collection. The remaining 557 kits are either in stock at a facility for use or are kits that were collected prior to the implementation of the new system and the paperwork has not yet been processed by the crime lab. As the paperwork is received and processed by the crime lab, the system is updated and the number in the latter category goes down almost every day.

In conclusion, the reality is that West Virginia is just beginning, but the exciting thing is that things are changing! By knowing where a sexual assault kit is at all times, and learning from the feedback gathered on the quality of kits collected, the Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System not only benefits West Virginia’s criminal justice system and our healthcare providers, but the victims themselves. And, implementing a solution like the West Virginia Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit Information System nationwide would lead to even more justice for victims of rape and sexual assault.