



POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM

5 Tips to Improve Your Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Reports

Writing reports for domestic violence or sexual assault cases can be challenging, even for experienced officers. These incidents are complex and emotionally charged, and they often involve limited physical evidence, reluctant victims, or both. It's important to remember that a report is only as strong as the investigation behind it. Even the best writing can't compensate for gaps in an investigation. If you don't thoroughly gather, document, and corroborate the facts, your report may fall short—no matter how well you've written it.

The following tips will not only strengthen your report writing but also enhance the quality of your investigations. They're practical, field-tested, and rooted in the goal of supporting victims, ensuring accountability, and building cases that withstand scrutiny.

TIP 1

Use direct quotes. Capturing the victim's experience accurately is critical—and often challenging. Often, officers try to summarize a victim's narrative but instead unintentionally sanitize or dilute what they say. Using direct quotes in the victim's own voice—making sure your reports include the exact language the victim used to describe the assault, as well as the circumstances and behaviors surrounding the incident—can improve your reports' accuracy considerably.

AI-Assisted Reports

It is important to note that AI tools generating draft reports may omit or condense parts of a victim's account without including direct quotations. Officers are encouraged to supplement reports with detailed information that may not be captured by AI systems.

TIP 2

Don't skip the 911 call. Dispatch notes are helpful, but they're just summaries—and they often miss key details. Listening to the actual 911 call can reveal critical information: the victim's tone, urgency, background voices (including suspects or children), and real-time reactions. When practical or possible, officers should listen to the 911 call before they meet with the victim. In domestic violence cases especially, these calls often contain raw, unfiltered evidence that will not surface again later.

Documenting 911 Calls in Reports

Documenting what victims and assailants say in 911 calls adds depth to your report and can lead to further investigation. Although 911 recordings are generally considered hearsay, they may be admissible under certain circumstances. Because it is not officers who determine the admissibility of 911 call recordings or transcripts, they should document the existence of these materials in their reports even if they have not been able to review them. Clearly noting that a recording of a 911 call is available can play a significant role in the investigative process and subsequent proceedings.

TIP 3

Describe trauma. Describing physical evidence such as injury in reports should become second nature as officers gain experience in investigations; they should also recognize and document signs of trauma. Also, the victim's demeanor can powerfully convey the impact of a traumatic experience. Using descriptors such as *crying, shaking, staring off, inability to focus, unable to answer questions, breathing heavily, blunted or numbed emotions*, and other indicators can illustrate the presence of trauma—and where there is trauma, there is evidence. Just remember that there is no single way a victim responds to trauma. **Each individual reacts differently, and an officer's role is not to judge credibility based on behavior.** Instead, focus on documenting what you observe—objectively and thoroughly.

TIP 4

Investigate the absence of consent. The language used in reports shapes how cases are investigated, prosecuted, and interpreted by triers of fact (i.e., the judge or the jury). Officers should use words consistent with statutory language and that accurately describe the nature of the offense and align with legal standards. This standard is particularly important and yet challenging when writing the report, as sometimes victims will describe the event using language that may imply they consented (e.g., “we had sex. . .”) while corroborating evidence and other factors may indicate there was no consent (“. . .but I don't remember it because I was passed out.”).

TIP 5

Document corroborating evidence. Suspects often use the consent defense, or in domestic violence cases, try to manipulate officers into believing the victim was the primary aggressor. To counter these tactics, it's essential that officers thoroughly document assault factors in their reports. This begins with describing victim demeanor, as previously discussed, and extends to capturing the victim's emotions and feelings. Documenting whether a victim expressed fear—such as fear of dying, suffering further harm, or experiencing continued violence—is critical. Officers should also describe the following:

- **Physical factors**—injuries, defensive wounds, or signs of restraint or strangulation
- **Environmental factors**—confinement, signs of a struggle, use or presence of weapons, or lack of access to help
- **Behavioral dynamics**—coercion, control, isolation, revenge, or punishment, or behavior of other witnesses
- **Substance involvement**—whether drugs or alcohol were consumed voluntarily, surreptitiously, or forcibly
- **History of abuse**—prior incidents of violence, threats, intimidation, or controlling behavior, whether recent or historical

These elements help paint a comprehensive picture of the victim's experience and support the integrity of the investigation. Documenting corroborating evidence is just as important as documenting statements. And remember, body-worn cameras are an accountability tool, not a primary investigative tool.

These five tips can make a difference in the quality of your reports to support victims, facilitate prosecution, and ultimately hold offenders accountable.