

Strengthening Victim Safety and Case Outcomes Through Effective Referrals



POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM

Ujima
The National Center on Violence
Against Women in the Black Community

Law enforcement officers are often the first point of contact for people who are frightened, overwhelmed, and unsure of how to proceed after incidents of domestic violence or sexual assault. Equipping officers with the knowledge and tools needed to connect victims with community-based service providers—including advocates, counselors, culturally specific organizations, and legal resources—can strengthen investigations, improve cooperation, and build long-term trust between police and the communities they serve.

The following tips outline practical ways officers can integrate meaningful referrals into their responses.

Tip 1

Provide immediate, clear referral options. Victims often struggle to process information after trauma, so simply providing a written referral card isn't always enough. Offering clear, specific referrals to local organizations—ideally through a warm handoff—can significantly increase the likelihood that a victim will connect with support services. Officers should maintain up-to-date knowledge of available community resources, including local domestic violence service providers, sexual assault advocacy organizations, legal aid, and shelters; they should also be able to speak with victims about the services these organizations provide. Access to these resources enables victims to engage in safety planning, secure housing, receive crisis counseling, obtain legal assistance, and access other critical supports.

Tip 2

Build relationships with victim service providers. Be familiar with the services available in the community. Knowing local advocates, program staff, and agency leaders enables officers to make informed, warm referrals and speak credibly about available support. Strong relationships also help law enforcement better understand how services are delivered and give advocates better insight into law enforcement. This mutual understanding improves communication with victims; supports coordinated responses; and allows for faster, more effective assistance—especially in high-risk incidents.

Tip 3

Provide individually tailored referrals. Victims have diverse experiences, needs, and barriers to seeking help, and no single service fits every situation. When possible, make referrals that align with a victim's specific cultural, linguistic, or other needs. Tailored referrals can increase their comfort, safety, and engagement in the process. For law enforcement, these partnerships also help build trust with communities that may be hesitant to engage with police.

Tip 4

Explain how advocacy supports the criminal case. Victims are more likely to participate in an investigation when they feel supported, informed, and treated fairly. Victim advocates play a vital role by offering safety planning, court accompaniment, housing assistance, and trauma-informed care. When officers clearly explain not only that advocates can help but also how they provide practical support, survivors often feel less isolated and more confident about staying engaged with both services and the legal process.

Tip 5

Follow up when possible. When appropriate, a brief follow-up contact to confirm services were received or to offer additional resources can demonstrate care and commitment. This follow-up increases the likelihood of continued engagement with both services and law enforcement. It also provides an opportunity to identify escalating risk, gather additional case details, and reinforce safety planning.