

A Quick Tip Sheet for Law Enforcement on Treating All Victims with Respect



POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM

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Against Women in the Black Community

Law enforcement officers play a central role in ensuring that all victims feel heard, respected, and supported as they report sexual assault and domestic violence crimes. An officer's approach during their first interactions with a victim plays a critical role in establishing trust and safety. These first moments can significantly influence whether a victim feels comfortable sharing information, engaging in the criminal justice process, and seeking help—now or in the future.

The following five tips offer practical guidance for officers to build trust and improve communication with victims.

Tip 1

Listen first, act second. Give the victim space to share their story without interruption, assumptions, or pressure. Interrupting or rushing an interview can cause a victim to shut down or withhold important details. Active listening helps build trust and rapport, which not only encourages more detailed information but also increases the likelihood that the victim will remain engaged throughout the investigation and prosecution processes.

Taking the time to truly listen is especially important for victims who may already fear they won't be believed because of past negative experiences or perceptions of police. Demonstrating patience and respect can make a meaningful difference in their willingness to open up.

Tip 2

Use trauma-informed communication skills. Trauma can significantly impact how the brain recalls and communicates information. Many victims may be experiencing shock, fear, physical injuries, cultural barriers, or prior trauma. When speaking with a victim, use a calm and steady tone, and avoid language that may feel accusatory, such as “why” questions. Instead, frame questions in a neutral and supportive way. Offer choices whenever possible (e.g., “Is it okay if I sit here?”) to restore their sense of control. Explain your actions before taking them, and move at a pace that allows the victim to process what is happening. Patience and clarity are imperative to ensure a victim doesn't feel overwhelmed, judged, or blamed for what they experienced.

Tip 3

Honor cultural identities and individual experiences. Each person an officer encounters carries their own background, experiences, and perceptions of law enforcement. These impressions may be shaped by past interactions, both personal and observed, which can significantly influence how victims interact with officers and other authority figures. By approaching conversations with humility, respect, and an open mind, officers can help reduce fear and distrust. This in turn encourages more honest and accurate communication. While it is unrealistic to expect officers to be experts in every culture, maintaining an awareness of and sensitivity to the fact that cultural differences exist is essential.

Tip 4

Avoid judgment about the victim's choices or circumstances. It is never appropriate to assign blame to a victim for the assault or abuse they have experienced. Responsibility lies solely with the abuser—no action or inaction by the victim, such as staying, leaving, using substances, returning to a location, or maintaining contact with their abuser, causes the abuse. Victims constantly make decisions in complex and difficult circumstances, including concerns about safety, finances, caregiving responsibility, social pressure, and deeply rooted fears. Expressing judgment about a victim's decisions can shut down communication. In contrast, maintaining a neutral, respectful, and supportive demeanor helps build trust; it keeps victims engaged and may increase their willingness to seek help, share information, and participate in the justice process.

Tip 5

Protect privacy and dignity at every step. Whenever possible, interviews should be conducted in a private setting, free from bystanders, family members, or unnecessary personnel. Victim advocates—whether agency-based or from community organizations—are not extraneous and should always be available to accompany a victim during interviews, if the victim wishes.

Ensuring privacy is a professional responsibility. For many people, publicly disclosing their experience can carry serious risks, including retaliation, loss of housing or employment, and damage to family or social relationships.

These tips serve as a quick reminder that dignity, patience, and cultural awareness are essential components of effective and ethical policing.