

HER IMPACT INITIATIVE

Resource Guides for Women & Allies

Guides to inform, empower, and activate.

Inspired by a conversation with entrepreneur, activist, and princess Lerato Motea

Rape Kits & Reporting Systems — What's Broken and How to Bridge the Gap

When a survivor must navigate a broken system to access a rape kit, the system is causing harm twice. Here's what's happening — and what communities are doing about it.

What Is a Rape Kit?

A rape kit — also called a Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence (SAFE) kit — is a collection of physical evidence gathered after a sexual assault. It may include DNA samples, clothing fibers, photographs of injuries, and other forensic material. It is a crucial tool for prosecution and can be the difference between a case proceeding or collapsing.

The Systemic Problem

“It was unfathomable that women who've been violated now need to go to the police station where they don't feel supported to get rape kits — because they need to report themselves into a system. It felt like an added extra layer of pain and suffering.”

In many countries, including South Africa, rape kits are not automatically available at shelters, hospitals, or crisis centers. Survivors must often go to a police station — a place many do not feel safe — to access them. The barriers include:

- Having to report to law enforcement before receiving care
- Police stations that are understaffed, undertrained, or hostile to survivors
- Long wait times that compromise the quality of evidence
- Backlog of untested rape kits in storage — in the US alone, hundreds of thousands sit untested
- Geographic barriers in rural and underserved communities

Community-Led Solutions

One response has been to take kit production and distribution out of the police system entirely — producing kits within shelters and crisis organizations so that survivors can access them without first interacting with law enforcement.

- **Shelter-based access:** Crisis homes and domestic violence shelters housing their own kits reduces the burden on survivors to travel to a police station
- **Community advocates:** Trained advocates who can accompany survivors through the reporting process, navigating systems on their behalf
- **Hospital-based programs:** Some jurisdictions allow hospitals to collect evidence independently of police involvement, giving survivors time to decide whether to report
- **Forensic nurse examiners:** Specialized nurses trained in trauma-informed evidence collection bring clinical care and legal documentation together

Key principle: Survivors should be able to access medical care and preserve evidence without being forced to immediately enter the criminal justice system.

How to Help

- Donate to local rape crisis centers and shelters that provide survivor support
- Advocate for hospital-based SANE programs in your community
- Support End the Backlog campaigns that push for kit testing legislation
- Volunteer as a crisis hotline advocate or accompany survivors to appointments

Resources

- RAINN (rainn.org) — rape crisis hotline and resource directory
- End the Backlog — endthebacklog.org — Joyful Heart Foundation's campaign on untested rape kits
- SANE Program Directory — search via the International Association of Forensic Nurses (iafn.org)
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center — nsvrc.org

This resource guide was developed by the Her Impact Initiative. For more information or to share your story, contact us.