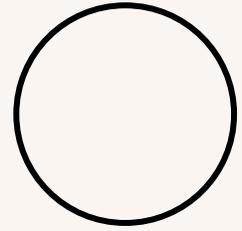


WILLIAMSON COUNTY, TEXAS

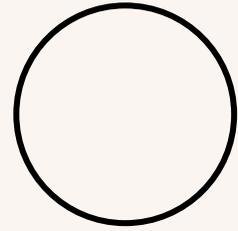


**SEXUAL ASSAULT
RESPONSE TEAM
2023 BIENNIAL REPORT**

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SART OVERVIEW



What is SART, and what is its purpose?

In 2021, the 87th Texas Legislature passed SB 476 which requires all Texas counties to form a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) in order to have a statewide infrastructure of resources, awareness, connection, and coordination to address adult sex crimes at a local level.

Each county's commissioners court is required to establish a SART for the purpose of organizing professionals from multiple disciplines to provide wrap-around support to survivors of adult sexual assault.

The Williamson County SART consists of many law enforcement, advocacy, mental health, and medical organizations. The law which created the requirement for a county SART enumerated statutory core members that *must* be identified and involved with the team. The current statutory core members of the Williamson County SART are:

- Jimmie Gabel, Vice President of Client Service – Hope Alliance
- Ryan Bownds, Chief Prosecutor of the Special Victims Unit – Office of the District Attorney, 26th Judicial District of Texas
- Commander Tom Sloan, Criminal Investigations Division – Round Rock Police Department
- Lieutenant Jason Braeutigam – Williamson County Sheriff's Office
- Crystal Love, Executive Director – Brave Alliance
- Andrea Richardson – Bluebonnet Trails
- Lieutenant Bobby Vernengo – Cedar Park Police Department

While these listed members are the statutorily required members of the SART, many other agencies voluntarily participate and are involved in the Williamson County SART in order to provide unified care for survivors of adult sexual assault.

Some of the intended purposes of the SART are to track data related to reports, investigations, and prosecutions of adult sexual assaults; ensure appropriate protocols are created and implemented across all agencies involved in the process of a survivor receiving services or making a report of sexual assault; and to collaborate, communicate and coordinate amongst agencies at all levels.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the initiation of SB 476, the Williamson County SART has been in the process of creating protocols that can be agreed upon by all participating agencies. Per statute, every odd numbered year requires that a report be submitted to the Commissioners Court of each county detailing particular information and statistics.

The purpose of this report is to comply with the requirements enumerated in SB 476, and to provide the Commissioners Court with an understanding of what the Williamson County SART has been involved with from January 2022 to September 30th, 2023.

Among other things detailed herein, the Williamson County SART has coordinated and agreed upon Sexual Assault Response Protocols, participated in training and other activities to engage the members of the team, and maintain data related to the investigation and prosecution of adult sexual assault (and similar or related) offenses in Williamson County.

When evaluating the data presented in this report, only sexual assault offenses committed against an individual who was 18 years old or older are covered by the SART. Offenses committed against an individual who was a child at the time of the assault are specifically not included within the statutory mandate.

It is important to note, since the creation of the bill mandating SARTs passed in 2021, and the biennial reports are required every odd numbered year, this 2023 report is the *very first* year that any such report has been created.

As the process of reporting and data collection are still in their infancy, this report attempts to be as accurate as possible. Therefore, it is important to note that the reporting process and data collection are still in their trial stages.

DATA AND FINDINGS

Below is a chart diagramming the data provided by participating law enforcement agencies specifying the number of adult sexual assault reports received and cases investigated.

Law Enforcement Agency	Sexual Assault Reports Received*	Sexual Assaults Reports Investigated*
Cedar Park Police Department	67	50
Hutto Police Department	11	11
Taylor Police Department	4	4
Round Rock Police Department	92	85
Leander Police Department	No Information Provided	No Information Provided
Williamson County Sheriff's Office	82	56

Below is a chart diagramming the prosecution data related to adult sexual assault cases received by the Office of the Williamson County District Attorney for the 26th Judicial District of Texas for decisions made from January 1, 2022 – October 30, 2023. Note: Cases resolved but filed prior to 2022 will show as a resolution but not be counted as having been filed during this time

Prosecutorial Action	Number of Cases
New Adult Sexual Assault (ASA)* Charges Filed	54
ASA Indictments Filed (True Bill)	47
ASA Indictments Rejected (No Bill)	15
ASA Charges Convicted**	24

ASA Charges Dismissed*	17
Defendant's Acquitted***	1

* While sexual assault is a specific offense enumerated in the Texas Penal Code, agencies have included in their numbers cases which may not fall under that specific statutory language but could include things like, Aggravated Sexual Assault or Prohibited Sexual Conduct. Each agency was allowed to evaluate the cases involved to determine if they qualified as a sexual violent offense.

** For purposes of this data, the "conviction" language includes cases where a defendant was placed on probation (including deferred adjudication probation) or prison

***This category *only* includes cases where a trial was held, and a defendant was specifically found "not guilty."

PROTOCOLS

The protocols of the Williamson County SART are contained in their entirety herein:

WILLIAMSON COUNTY SEXUAL ASSAULT RESPONSE TEAM PROTOCOL

Adopted December 2022 | Ratified November 2023

PURPOSE

- A. The Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) is a group of individuals and agencies who work independently on a day-to-day basis and communicate with each other regularly to discuss mutual cases and solve mutual problems related to disclosures of sexual assault in Williamson County, Texas, thus minimizing survivor re-traumatization and increasing the efficacy of response.
- B. The purpose of this Protocol is to establish and maintain a clear, and effective community-wide coordinated approach and response to the problem of sexual assault that prioritizes the health and safety of survivors. This Protocol represents the combined efforts of professionals from law enforcement, medical personnel, advocacy, and the judicial system. The appointed team membership and requested attendance may change over time depending on the needs of the survivors served and the goals of the SART. Interagency cooperation is essential in supporting the healing process of survivors, and in facilitating the arrest, prosecution, and conviction of the sexual offenders.

MISSION

- A. The mission of the Williamson County SART is to build communication and collaboration between agencies serving sexual assault survivors. The SART initiative is a survivor-centered project designed to provide a collaborative, interdisciplinary team response to sexual assault. The goal of the SART is to provide services to ensure a transition from victim to survivor free of re-traumatization for every individual whose life is impacted by sexual violence.
- B. The technical expertise and collaboration of the SART is vital to the community's ultimate goals: Appropriate and successful prosecution and restoration of the survivor's sense of safety, agency and wellness.
- C. Members of the Williamson County SART meet bi-monthly to discuss trends, cases, and improvements to survivors of sexual assault services. The SART meetings allow for and encourage collaborative communication, discussion of concerns, problem solving, and conflict resolution as necessary.

GUIDELINES

- A. The physical, emotional and psychological well-being of the sexual assault survivor is the priority throughout the sexual assault investigation and prosecution.
- B. The health care facility considers the personal safety and health care needs of the survivor.
- C. The forensic nurse offers a medical forensic exam in compliance with agency guidelines.
- D. The sexual assault advocate considers the well-being of the survivor as well as the family and/or friends of the survivor.
- E. The law enforcement representative works to ensure the safety of the survivor and the quality and integrity of the sexual assault investigation.
- F. The District and County Attorney's office works in coordination with the respective agencies to ensure an effective response to sexual assault.
- G. The diverse needs of the survivor; including, but not limited to, abilities, gender, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation/identity, economic status, literacy, language and access to resources, are recognized, and action is taken to provide respectful and appropriate accommodations and services.
- H. All survivors of sexual assault receive individualized, developmentally appropriate treatment.
- I. Every effort is made to protect and respect all sexual assault survivors' right to confidentiality at every stage of their involvement with SART and by each participating SART member.
- J. Each survivor of sexual assault will have the opportunity to provide feedback regarding their experience with the criminal justice process and services provided by the SART via follow up calls and emails.

SECTION I: PROTOCOLS RELATED TO RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES

- A. Law Enforcement Response
 - 1. When law enforcement receives a report of a sexual assault, officers take steps to protect the victim from further harm and follow all applicable standard operating procedures.
 - 2. For all survivors of sexual assault, law enforcement will offer the opportunity for a forensic nurse exam. If the survivor wishes to proceed with the exam law enforcement will notify the SAFE site, hospital or forensic nurse and victim's services. The forensic nurse immediately contacts Williamson County Crisis Center dba Hope Alliance to access a sexual assault program advocate.
 - 3. When the police and victim arrive at the medical facility, the patient will be medically screened, per medical facility policy, prior to completion of forensic exam. The forensic nurse, may stay with the victim during any necessary medical evaluation and until the victim is cleared medically and transferred to the medical forensic examination area. If no forensic nurse is present to accompany the victim

during the medical evaluation process, a community based or law enforcement advocate may remain with the victim, if the victim so desires.

4. All survivors being interviewed as part of an investigation following a sexual assault report are offered access to a sexual assault program advocate. Law enforcement contacts Williamson County Crisis Center dba Hope Alliance.
5. In non-acute cases that involve a prepubescent victim, the detective will follow established protocol to contact the Children's Advocacy Center for an interview and SANE, as appropriate.
6. Interagency information is shared in accordance with state and federal law, to ensure the timely exchange of relevant information including, but not limited to date, time, location of SANE.

B. Medical Personnel/Hospital Response

1. If a minor or geriatric/disabled sexual assault victim presents to a hospital emergency room initially, hospital personnel may contact law enforcement.
2. If an adult sexual assault victim able to give consent presents to a hospital emergency room initially, only with patient consent may hospital personnel notify the appropriate law enforcement following triage and medical screening.
3. If consent to involve law enforcement is given, then law enforcement will discuss potential options available to the victim for a SANE, including possible locations where one may take place. Law enforcement will then contact Victim Services and assist in arranging a SANE if desired by the victim.
4. If consent to involve law enforcement is not given, then contact shall be made with Williamson County Crisis Center dba Hope Alliance and/or Brave Alliance, for discussion of options available to the victim for a SANE, including possible locations where one may take place. The contacted agency shall then assist in arranging a SANE if desired by the victim.
5. If an adult sexual assault victim presents to area hospital and states that they have been sexually assaulted and does not wish to make a report to law enforcement, the triage nurse contacts Williamson County Crisis Center dba Hope Alliance to access a sexual assault program advocate to speak with the patient about options.
6. Hospital staff will work in conjunction with the sexual assault program advocate to determine patient's desire to report to law enforcement. If patient states that they do not want to report the crime to law enforcement at time of disclosure the patient may still want and be permitted to have evidence collected or a medical exam performed. If the patient reports to a hospital that does not have access to a forensic nurse, the staff will provide a medical screening and transfer patient to designated SAFE facility (or if patient refuses transfer, offer a basic forensic exam if available). In Williamson County, SAFE designated hospitals will accept patients as transfers unless the patient's associated injuries warrant a specialized service not available at the proposed receiving hospital. The patient will be triaged and medically screened per hospital policy.
7. Interagency information is shared in accordance with state and federal law, to ensure the timely exchange of relevant information including, but not limited to date, time, location of SANE.

C. Anonymous Disclosures and Reporting

1. In accordance with Federal and State regulations, adults presenting to health care providers requesting a forensic examination, who have elected not to make a complaint to law enforcement, will be provided with an exam and appropriate evidence collection. Special consideration for these patients will be made. The SART's desire for the patient is to insure appropriate medical care, timely advocacy, and continuous opportunity to involve law enforcement.
2. Procedures for anonymous reporting include patient contact with health care provider, timely contact with advocacy, and comprehensive patient education regarding evidence storage, law enforcement involvement, and time limitations.

SECTION II: PROTOCOLS RELATED TO ACCESSIBILITY

A. Accessibility and Response of Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations

1. The forensic nurse will confirm contact with Williamson County Crisis Center dba Hope Alliance to access a sexual assault program advocate.
2. The forensic nurse will notify the victim of their legal sexual assault accompaniment rights. The patient will be given education about the exam, advocacy, and law enforcement involvement. The patient will be offered a medical forensic examination.
3. The forensic nurse will speak with the patient and attempt to determine the location of the sexual assault. Location of assault will assist the advocate and nurse in formulating a patient safety plan, potentially including a report to the appropriate law enforcement agency.
4. When requested by the victim, in accordance with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure and the Texas Government Code, a sexual assault program advocate will accompany the victim into the examination room to provide support during the exam.
5. Prophylactic medications for sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will be offered as indicated at the time of the exam. This offering will be based on patient exam and history. Should additional medications be needed a prescription will be given to the patient to fill at the pharmacy of their choice.
6. The forensic nurse will provide information regarding follow-up medical care. The forensic nurse, VS and/or the advocate will make arrangements, at the victim's request, to contact the victim for follow-up, supportive counseling, information and referral, and legal advocacy- including information and assistance with Crime Victims' Compensation and Victims' Rights.
7. When the medical forensic examination is complete, the forensic nurse or forensic nursing program will release the evidence and documentation to law enforcement with the patient's written consent.
8. At the time of discharge, the patient will be given OAG information sheets on how to retrieve their evidence should they choose to report within five years. Non-report evidence collection kits will be sent to the Texas Department of Public Safety's currently designated storage facility.

B. Accessibility and Response of Sexual Assault Program Advocates

1. Survivors have the right to a sexual assault program advocate be present during SANEs and law enforcement investigative interviews.
2. Sexual assault program advocates as defined by Section 420.003, Government Code are accessed through Williamson County Crisis Center dba Hope Alliance 24/7 by calling the hotline at 1-800-460-7233.
3. Upon request by law enforcement, medical personnel/hospital, or forensic nurse, an advocate will respond, in person within one hour of the initial call to the location of SANE and/or investigative interview. Some advocates have various language capacities, and all have access to interpreting services.
4. The advocate will be introduced to the survivor and support persons prior to the examination and/or investigative interview, when possible
5. The survivor and support persons will be given the opportunity to decide how they want to interact with the advocate during the examination and/or investigative interview, including dismissal of the advocate.
6. The advocate may be present for the exam if desired by the survivor in accordance with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure and the Texas Government Code.
7. The advocate's role is to provide crisis intervention, information, referrals, and support services. They cannot provide transportation, respond to a survivor's home or scene of a crime, act as an interpreter, or participate in the gathering of evidence or investigation of the sexual assault. Interpretive services provided by an involved agency shall be utilized with the consent of that agency.
8. Information shared by the survivor to the sexual assault advocate is privileged and therefore entitled to protection from disclosure in court and legal proceedings.

C. Accessibility of Medical Care

1. *Information on the availability of and access to medical care when the care is clinically indicated.*

D. Accessibility of Behavioral Health Services

1. Williamson County's Local Mental Health Authority is Bluebonnet Trails Community Services. They offer a crisis hotline and mobile crisis outreach team for immediate 24/7 response to behavioral health crises accessible by calling 1-800-841-1255. They partner with Williamson County Emergency Services at 911 dispatch – and respond as the backup center for Texans calling 988, the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
2. Bluebonnet Trails Community Services also offers behavioral health services including counseling, medication management, respite, substance use treatment, and case management accessible by calling 1-844-309-6385.
3. Behavioral health hospitals offering hotline services and inpatient, partial hospitalization, and intensive outpatient treatment located in Williamson County for persons seeking mental wellness and recovery from substance addictions include:
 - i. Rock Springs 512-948-3636
 - ii. Georgetown Behavioral Health Institute 512-819-1154

SECTION III: PROTOCOLS RELATED TO BILLING AND PAYMENT

- A. In accordance with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure Article 56A.304 the health care facility, sexual assault nurse examiner, or sexual assault examiner that provides the examination will make an application to the attorney general for reimbursement in the amount set by the attorney general for the forensic examination. This application must include certification that the examination was conducted in accordance with the requirements of Article 56A.303(a), and a complete and itemized bill of the reasonable costs of the forensic portion of the examination. The health care facility, sexual assault nurse examiner, or sexual assault examiner must request additional reimbursement when necessary but must provide justification to the attorney general.
- B. This article does not require a law enforcement agency to pay any costs of treatment for injuries. Therefore, the victim will be informed and provided information regarding Crime Victims' Compensation (CVC) in order to cover other expenses related to the crime. Victim Services and/or Hope Alliance will then assist victims in applying for CVC. Given that medical insurance information is required for billing in the event that the victim does not complete or follow CVC guidelines and is held responsible for all medical expenses and given that CVC is a payer of last resort, all hospitals hosting and/or acting as SAFE sites will obtain any information regarding private insurance, Medicaid, or Medicare per hospital guidelines.
- C. Victim Services and/or Hope Alliance will assist with any CVC reimbursement. They may also follow up with hospital administration to advocate for all remaining ER / physician fees be waived for the victim.

SECTION IV: PROTOCOLS RELATED TO PROSECUTING SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES

- A. Sexual Assault survivors will be contacted by the prosecutor within 72 hours of receiving the case. Survivors will also be updated prior to grand jury proceedings and if possible, have an in-person meeting prior to grand jury.
- B. Sexual Assault survivors will be notified prior to any plea offers and negotiations. If the victim is unable to be contacted, attempts will be made to email and find updated contact information as much as possible. In cases where the prosecutor has taken exhaustive measures to inform the survivor of the plea and still been unable to make contact, a plea agreement can be reached without survivor input.
- C. All survivors will be met with in person for trial preparations. If an in-person meeting is not possible, a video conference is sufficient.
- D. All survivors will be treated with respect and understanding. Survivors will know that their thoughts and feelings on the outcomes matter. They will be updated on what is going on with the case on a regular basis and should expect honest communication from the prosecutor.

SECTION V: CASE REVIEWS PROTOCOL

- A. In an effort to continually minimize sexual assault survivor re-traumatization and increase the efficacy of response, cases will be reviewed as consented by survivors and biennially at minimum.
- B. Sensitivity to a survivor's health, safety, and healing is sustained when attempting to obtain a survivor's consent.
- C. A written and signed consent by the survivor specifying what information can be shared, for the purpose of case review, and who can receive the information is required in order to review the survivor's case.
- D. Unless a survivor has signed a written consent to release information as outlined in B. of this section, privacy and confidentiality is maintained during case reviews as required by law.
- E. Cases reviewed, including successes, problems identified, and solutions agreed upon, inform the biennial assessment and evaluation.

SECTION VI: CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROTOCOL

- A. Conflict is a normal and important part of growth and movement toward the mission and when attended to constructively and respectfully, can be an opportunity to strengthen collaboration and trust. Steps taken to resolve conflict include:
 - a. Creating an effective atmosphere
 - b. Clarifying perceptions
 - c. Focus on individual
 - d. Building shared positive power
 - e. Looking to the future
 - f. Generating options
 - g. Developing "doables" aka stepping-stones to actions
 - h. Making mutually beneficial agreements

(as identified by Jeanpaul Tshimanga)
- B. Unless a survivor has signed a written release of information specifying what information is to be shared and with who, privacy and confidentiality is maintained during conflict resolution as required by law.

SECTION VII: CROSS-AGENCY TRAINING PROTOCOL

- A. At minimum, 4 hours of annual cross-agency training related to dynamics of sexual assault is required for members. When appropriate and possible, efforts to collaborate and coordinate in person multi-agency trainings will be made.

SECTION VIII: COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AND SART EVALUATION

- A. Community assessment is an ongoing process that includes but is not limited to trending sexual assault reports to law enforcement agencies, SANE/SAFEs, and advocacy services during each SART meeting with special attention to drug-facilitated sexual assault, predatory date rape, and sex-trafficking.
- B. Every other year, an evaluation is conducted using sexual assault case reviews to measure the effectiveness of individual agency and interagency protocols and systems.