

Just a Trauma-Informed Response to At-Home Sexual Assault Kits

Introduction [00:00:05] Now this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:19] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In the final episode of our Perspectives on At-Home Sexual Assault Kits season, Just Science sat down with Natasha Alexenko, Lieutenant Jordan Satinsky, and Marya Simmons to discuss at-home sexual assault kits through a victim-centered lens. Throughout this season, Just Science has spoken with various subject matter experts to discuss several perspectives posed by the use of at-home sexual assault evidence collection kits. As criminal justice practitioners and advocates, Natasha, Jordan, and Marya have prioritized focusing on trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches to support survivors of sexual violence. Listen along as our guests discuss their work in sexual assault response, the complexities of evidence collection, and their thoughts on at-home sexual assault kits in this episode of Just Science. This season is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Tyler Raible.

Tyler Raible [00:01:27] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Tyler Raible, with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. This season, we've been talking about at-home sexual assault evidence collection kits. We've been referring to them as at-home kits. And today we're going to take more of a holistic approach to the conversation. So I'm joined by three different subject matter expert in varying fields, but I'm joined by Natasha Alexenko, Jordan Satinsky, and Marya Simmons. Natasha, Jordan, Marya, it's so great to see you again. It's always awesome to have you guys on the show.

Natasha Alexenko [00:01:55] It is always great to be here.

Marya Simmons [00:01:58] Absolutely. Thank you for having us back again.

Jordan Satinsky [00:02:00] Yes, thank you very much.

Tyler Raible [00:02:01] I'm thrilled to have everybody here, and as our audience may or may not know, you- you've been guests on the show before. But for anybody who isn't necessarily familiar, let's- let's take a second to talk a little bit about what each of you do. Jordan, do you want to go first?

Jordan Satinsky [00:02:13] My name is Jordan Satinsky. I'm a Lieutenant with Montgomery County Police Department in Maryland. Currently, I'm the executive officer to one of the existing chiefs. But prior to that, I spent about 15 or so years in the sexual assault world as either a child sexual assault, physical assault investigator or an adult sex crimes investigator. And then I went back and started up our adult sex crimes unit. I worked active and acute cases, and I've been working with this program and some others for many years talking all about and educating folks all about sexual assault investigations.

Tyler Raible [00:02:44] Natasha, how about you?

Natasha Alexenko [00:02:45] Hi, Tyler. My name is Natasha Alexenko. I am a survivor of sexual assault. I was raped and robbed at gunpoint in the 90s. My kit remained untested for nearly a decade. Thankfully, the man that raped and robbed me was found in CODIS through DNA many years later. But really, my gratitude and the people I met along the journey, my journey for justice really inspired me to utilize my story as a springboard to help others and perhaps formulate something that works across the board - ways in which we can take our system and improve upon it. And just utilizing this amazing idea of teamwork, coming together as a multi-disciplinary team. I think it's just brilliant to include survivors in this dialogue. We have a unique expertise and a unique voice to include in this story.

Tyler Raible [00:03:40] And Marya, can you introduce yourself?

Marya Simmons [00:03:42] Absolutely. My name is Marya Simmons. My background is in victim advocacy in the criminal justice field. I have worked in the capacity of being a victim advocate for over 12, 13 years now and where I really supported victims of sexual assault, human trafficking, domestic violence, and families of homicide victims inside and outside of the judicial system process. And prior to being a victim advocate, I worked as a chemical dependency counselor. I also worked in my county prosecutor's office as a victim witness supervisor as well as my local rape crisis center where I supported victims of sexual assault and trauma from children all the way to the elderly population. My passion for victim advocacy and strengthening multidisciplinary teams really stems from my dedication to supporting and empowering victims and contributing to systemic changes to elevate their voices.

Tyler Raible [00:04:33] I love that, that all of you brought up the- this concept of the multidisciplinary team, and I know that the three of you have conducted trainings together as part of this multidisciplinary approach on topics like trauma-informed practices and recommendations for supporting survivors. So could you all tell us a little bit about these trainings and these trauma-informed practices?

Jordan Satinsky [00:04:52] You know, this is such a unique group, and I really appreciate working with Natasha and Marya. Having an officer, a victim advocate, and a survivor all together to talk about the approach to these types of investigations is unique. It doesn't happen. I give Natasha so much credit for coming forward and doing what she's doing and helping us educate the world on and those of my yoke on how to conduct these investigations. And Marya brings this other side of it from victim advocacy, which is so important - that is really starting to become into the fold of law enforcement. But wasn't, I mean, the victim advocacy role over the last 10 years has wildly changed within law enforcement. When I was a young detective, victim advocates stood outside the room. Now, we work together. It's a very, very different model. And the trainings that we go and we do on a state and national level all encompass this multidisciplinary approach, working together, and I think the biggest thing, and I'll let the other two speak to it as well, is really just checking your ego at the door and just working these cases in a very victim-centered, trauma-informed manner and really working for your victim, whether there's an arrest or not. It's entirely up to the survivor what happens and, you know, you work the cases the best you can.

Natasha Alexenko [00:06:02] Now, very, very well put, Jordan, and Marya and Jordan, you know, working with the two of you has just been one of the greatest experiences I've ever had and really hearing from you both the evolution, how essential having an advocate is in the room in order to conduct victim-centered, trauma-informed interview practices.

And I think that we're learning a lot and growing and- and that's something I think I've taken out of this is just how positive it can be when you bring a group of dynamic people together who have like a history and understand where we're coming from and really a great vision for the future. I think that positivity brings, brings just so much to the table that you can't possibly articulate into words.

Marya Simmons [00:06:51] Thank you, Jordan and Natasha. I also kind of just cosign what they both said, is that the work that we've done together has been very impactful. Hearing from the different angles and expertise that we all can contribute to these conversations, really to educate and spread awareness about the importance of working as a multidisciplinary team. And as Jordan had said, ten years ago, this process looked a lot different. Ten years ago, I really had to work hard to establish myself as a victim advocate to be in the rooms with victims and working with law enforcement and prosecutors, and that building rapport and trust with law enforcement and prosecutors for us to be at the table and have a voice for victims is so important. The focus of our conversations is facilitated through our personal experiences and expertise on best practice approaches and being trauma-informed, understanding what the impact of trauma looks like.

Tyler Raible [00:07:44] We've spent a lot of time talking about what we've been referring to as an at-home sexual assault kit. I was hoping before we really dive in, I could- I could gather your initial thoughts and maybe if you have any considerations or concerns about a person attempting to collect evidence with one of these kits?

Marya Simmons [00:08:00] Absolutely, Tyler. I have several concerns with the at-home rape kits. Although, this consideration may sound appealing in mitigating the challenges with the pandemic and trying to make this process more convenient, there are so many other aspects to consider. With that being said, my knowledge about the process and ethics in supporting victims, my initial thoughts are what about the victim's psychological safety, their level of trauma, the lack of necessary support during and after this process? How will victims be impacted if there are extensive injuries, and how will that affect them during the examination? Are victims being charged to pay for the kit when sexual assault examinations are free, and how this process will affect evidence collection and the investigative and prosecutorial process as well? Another one is what if there are language barriers? Is there access to translators and interpreters through the entire process? But there's also a lack of safety precautions in place. How do we know who's receiving these kits when they arrive? Is the perpetrator in the home? And what happens to the kits if it gets into the wrong hands, does that put the victim more in danger? So there are a lot of different things that concern me with this process, which I'm sure that we'll be able to kind of dive into a little bit further.

Tyler Raible [00:09:17] Absolutely. I'm looking forward to it. Natasha, what about you - what are your thoughts?

Natasha Alexenko [00:09:20] As a survivor and speaking to others who are just kind of share the same concerns as me, the issue is I think that so many of us are laymen before we kind of enter this world, and oftentimes fortunately so, and we really don't understand a lot of the process. How does a rape kit work? Where does it go, et cetera? And I think that a lot of us were confused initially on what these kits did. And if I'm being frank, I'm still a little confused. You know, now that I've been working in this field for a while, I understand CODIS. I understand how profiles are uploaded into the system. And I think that an individual who may not be aware of the process may instantly think that this kit has the

ability to find a perpetrator or enter a, you know, federal database. And my fear is that lack of information that comes along with it. I mean, we're so used to living in 2022 through a pandemic, these type of tests having instant results like doing a COVID test at home and in 15 minutes or less, you find out whether or not you have COVID and similar tests of that nature. So I'm concerned that there will be a misunderstanding of how these kits work and whether or not they are eligible to kind of enter the system and be part of the justice system. And I think there's just not enough information - that concerns me. So if someone is assaulted and they assume that this kit is sanctioned by law enforcement, sanctioned federally, they may not be aware of that case. And I, I think oftentimes, and I'm guilty of this as well, we kind of run under the assumption that everyone kind of knows how this process works, when that's not the case, and when the only other measurement you have is something that has instantaneous results, you don't necessarily have enough information to make an informed decision. And that is my concern, and that's a concern I'm hearing from other survivors. What does this kit do? I certainly echo 100 percent of everything being said in terms of, you know, a survivor may not have access to advocacy. There may be injuries that, due to shock, they're not aware of. So if you eliminate someone with medical expertise, someone with psychological expertise, that leaves you in a new vulnerable space because you're just kind of left alone without the amazing tools we have in place to support what your needs may be.

Jordan Satinsky [00:12:00] Natasha and Marya, I echo everything you both just said about how these at-home kits come into play and how they work with our system, our criminal justice system. And I think the biggest part of this from the law enforcement angle is these at-home kits provide victims with a false sense of security in a certain aspect. They're not evidentiary value. We can't put them into CODIS. I can't use them to help us further to find a suspect. And it basically closes off a door as far as the- that part of the investigation is concerned. If it was in a certain timeframe, maybe we could do it again. But it just really depends on if the victim wants to do that and if it's a reasonable option based on the totality of the circumstances, and what was contained in the kit. What they did, did they follow all the steps? Did they do everything? The other part, they're missing out on Marya, they're missing out on victim advocacy, they're missing out on that holistic approach to this. Cops aren't therapists. They're not advocates in that aspect. As much as they sometimes want to help, they just can't. They need that other arm. And then there's the forensic medical approach. All of that, you have somebody looking over you from not only a evidentiary collection standpoint, which is important for the police investigation, but also what about anything else that may have happened? Were there injuries, were there things that need to be checked on? We're missing out on those. We could end up with people taking an at-home kit having undiagnosed injuries and then being further injured or even dying because they weren't treated. Those are things that are sometimes caught at- during a medical clearance or even during a forensic medical evaluation. I just think these at-home kits, especially, and I believe Natasha said it earlier, the post-pandemic, you know, everything's at home, you know, it's easy. You know, we recreated how we work our lives. These at-home kits, they just create a false sense of security, and I feel like it's going to end up hurting more than it does helping.

Tyler Raible [00:13:39] Jordan, that's actually an excellent segue because I do want to really unpack a lot of, a lot of that was said here because we are working with multiple perspectives. And Natasha, so you mentioned this, this kind of, I don't want to say level of ignorance, but maybe this confusion that might be surrounding how these work - do you have any ideas or recommendations on, you know, how do we get the information to the people who need it?

Natasha Alexenko [00:14:00] Right, that's certainly always been a concern. You know, I hope no one ever needs to know this information. I hope that people go through their lives without having to understand this process at all. But I think it's an important one for a survivor to recognize. One, a rape kit, obviously, is collecting evidence. But there's other issues as well. There's antivirals to take into consideration - that can be done in the hospital. And you know, I understand that some survivors may not wish to go forward with a case for a variety of reasons. So perhaps there's a fear in place of, well, I don't necessarily want to get a rape kit done because perhaps I don't want to move forward with a case, whether it's for fear of retaliation from the perpetrator or whatever the case may be. I want more survivors to be aware of the fact that they don't have to move forward with a case if they get- have a rape kit done in a hospital setting. You know, that's a part of why a rape kit, why that evidence is collected, but it is not the only reason. It's to be connected with advocacy, to receive medical treatment, and perhaps to put things in stasis until a time where the survivor is ready to move forward. And communicating that is essential when we talk about advocacy. When we talk about support mechanisms for survivors, I think a large portion that is missing from what we kind of move forward with is the education piece. It's educating people on how to approach sexual assault and what to do if someone's sexually assaulted. And the other reason, besides educating the public, besides making everyone aware so they can make informed decisions as they move forward - we know that sexual assault is so underreported, and I feel if we empower people with this knowledge, the reporting rate will grow because individuals will be more confident in the process, will be more confident in the system and understand and have that perspective, and communicating that should be a part of what we do when we go out and we do sexual assault reform is, is education.

Tyler Raible [00:16:14] Yeah, I think the education piece is important and, you know, a lack of education kind of creates a barrier. And Marya, you'd mentioned a few barriers, including the well-being of the survivor. What else do we need to consider?

Marya Simmons [00:16:27] Yes, I think it's first important for the victim's psychological safety. The level of trauma and how their emotions and mental state will be impacted by performing such an invasive examination on their own is a huge concern for me. I've been in the hospital rooms with victims prior to, during, and after a forensic examination. Those raw emotions, trauma responses, the fear that victims experience is, is very overwhelming. Getting past the tears is one of the first hurdles, but the most impactful piece of it is having someone there by their side who is trauma-informed and who will be there for the long haul. And that is the most vital piece in getting over to the next hurdles that they will face going forward. SANE nurses, as Natasha had just talked about, who specialize in forensic collection for rape kits also play a vital role in this process. They have hours of training that strengthens their expertise in the nuances of effectively supporting victims of sexual assault, using trauma-informed practices, and they know what to look for and how to properly collect the evidence that is needed, and they know how to explain the process to victims to minimize retraumatization and anxiety. The lack of necessary support, again, during and after the examination for victims, I have worked with victims of sexual assault who have required immediate attention and access to resources to address their trauma and mental health concerns after their assault. I have had to contact mobile crisis for victims who have presented suicidal thoughts or had plans, and I've also worked with victims who are sober and had the potential of relapsing, which is extremely likely, and/or were concerns that they would further harm themselves because they were fearful, they may have blamed themselves, or were alone, and no one was there to support them, or they didn't know that there were supportive resources that would be there to help them. So as a victim advocate, I understand the importance of me being there as an advocate

following up with them after the examination. As Natasha just talked about, giving them information so they can make informed decisions and explaining things in a way for them to understand every step of the way. Without having that knowledge, victims are forced to process and deal with unanswered questions and concerns in real time, and the DIY rape kits cannot be a numbers process. Victims of sexual assault require a significantly higher level of support than a patient who may just be seeking telehealth services for a sick visit. Therapist and mental health professionals who provide telehealth services can appreciate the necessity of patience in the process to get victims to really begin to talk about what happened to them, let alone performing an examination that can take hours for a victim to do themselves. Another concern of mine is how will victims be impacted if there are extensive injuries? As Natasha's talked about, a SANE nurse's main priority is to make sure that they are treating their patient. If there are extensive or other injuries that may not have been noticed before, this victim is then going to be exposed to having to find out that they have injuries and how are they able to cope with that on their own? Scratches, bruises, tears or even cuts, they may need additional lab work done, X-rays, antibiotics, things of that nature and being able to explain what that looks like to a victim from a trained professional is very important. And so, according to the International Association for Forensic Nurses, they state that some patients experience strangulation during their assault, which can inflict hidden internal injuries that can have long causing medical and health consequences or even death, as Jordan had just talked about. So it's really important for us to consider all of these different nuances that can be existing for victims of sexual assault as they are going through this process, again, on their own.

Tyler Raible [00:20:21] Thank you, Marya, and I think that really highlights the value of having the SANE in the room. And I think that it also really underscores the value of their training expertise, and Jordan, you kind of mentioned this, too, that having the SANE there was important. And you mentioned, Jordan, that this at-home kit is likely not of evidentiary value. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Jordan Satinsky [00:20:40] Part of the issue with the DIY kit, as Marya was calling it, there's no training involved in that. You read a piece of paper. You take your samples. You put it back in a box. A SANE nurse goes through very specific training to not only work with their victim, get them the right services, make sure that, you know, they're physically OK and get them the services for mental, but also how to pull evidence from the victim in order to provide to law enforcement so we can utilize that under appropriate practices and chain of custody so we can input that into our local, state, and national databases for DNA. We have to be able to verify who took it, where it came from, who took it, that person was trained, and it meets all these requirements in order for us to put it into these databases. These at-home kits, they could have anything in there - standards that aren't well-produced, information that's not well-produced, and plus, who's taking the actual sample - the victim or a friend or someone they know, which is even worse, like having the victim do their own kit in-and-of themselves, I can't even imagine the mental load that puts on them. And then to invite a friend to help out, potentially, another person that you're now bringing into this. These folks are trained on how to do this. From the baseline law enforcement aspect, absolutely it's a chain of custody and enter into evidence systems issue, as well as documenting other injuries as there most likely are other injuries whether they're strangulation, scratches, cuts, other wounds where you could get potentially other DNA evidence, touch DNA, things along those lines that we would lose. Plus, you have to consider the clothing. There are certain ways that forensic nurse and/or the detective would take this clothing and package it, which these DIY kits don't provide for in some cases. So DIY kits present a, what I like to call, the instant gratification. Yes, I have this. I can do this. I don't have to include anyone else. But the problem when they show up at the

police station with the kit, first thing the detective is going to say once they figure out what's going on as they do become more prevalent, he or she is going to say, "What is this? I can't use this," and that's going to send a victim down a road. I mean, our criminal justice system is not set up particularly to embrace our victim. Our state is our victim. The victim - Natasha, sorry, you were a witness to the state, you know, and it's how to set that up in your mind correctly, where you are now a witness not a victim. Even though as police and victim advocates, we strive, and even prosecutors, to really push that victim narrative - on paper, when you read it and when you get those documents, it doesn't say that, and by bringing in these kits, you know, companies want to make money. And when they push these kits to victims, they see what appears to be the best process, and it's not. You know, one of the things in law enforcement - we're guilty of it as well as anyone else - there's not like there's an educational system for our victims out there. You know, we do have Sexual Assault Awareness Month, all that, I'm not saying about that, but we don't publicize, well, if this happens, these are the steps that are most likely going to happen. This is what we're going to end up doing. We're asking you to participate and potentially if you want. We do a lot of work amongst our own world - prior to me becoming a law enforcement officer, I couldn't tell you how any of this worked, and I'm sorry Natasha knows anything about it. You know, 90 percent of me is like that, the other 10 percent, I'm glad she's here as an advocate so other folks get it.

Tyler Raible [00:23:39] Yeah, that makes perfect sense, Jordan. And I think that maybe from a- from a survivor perspective and from a victim perspective, there might be some, some appeal to these at-home kits. Marya, is this at-home kit giving control back to the survivor or is it kind of like a false empowerment?

Marya Simmons [00:23:56] I think it could be false empowerment or potentially a delusional way of seeking justice for victims if they're not given the proper tools, resources, and information on what this process really looks like, as Jordan just talked about. We as professionals know how this process looks, and we're able to explain it no matter what professional that the victim engages with, whether it starts at the hospital or if it's law enforcement and/or if it's through counseling and therapy. All of us are trained for trauma-informed practices and what it looks like for victims to go through this process, and we can explain it step by step by step and/or linking them to other professionals who can support them through the process. So I think that the selling point that can be done in the privacy of their own homes, and that they do not have to go to a hospital or emergency room for the examination, that it could reduce anxiety or fear or being seen or judged by others. And/or they may think that because the kits are being done at their home, that the process will be less traumatizing. And again, because they may not have the information on what this process really looks like or should look like, then they may not make those informed decisions on their own.

Tyler Raible [00:25:08] From that kind of same vein, Natasha, then, is this a viable option for a survivor?

Natasha Alexenko [00:25:14] Well, you know, from- from my perspective, and being completely frank, you know, after I was assaulted, the first thing I wanted to do was take a shower. I certainly didn't want to go to the hospital for a rape kit. I didn't want to relive the trauma. If this at-home kit was available to me, with the limited amount of information I had at that time, I would have utilized it as an option. There is a stigma around sexual assault - eliminating that by not having to share, by not seeing someone face-to-face is easy. And I know, in my case in particular, when I went for my sexual assault evidence kit collection, there were things I was unaware of. I was unaware that antivirals were available to me,

and that was something I was fortunately given at that time. Trauma - I had no idea what trauma was. What did that mean? What did that look like for me? But somebody who met with me in the hospital, they were very aware of what that was, and they were really looking for signs of that. And, you know, I think that's what some of the danger is. The thing I regret the least about the process of my case is getting that rape kit done. Getting that rape kit done changed my life. I was the complaining witness in the case. The most important thing to me, even at that time, was to ensure that no one else was hurt, that it stopped with me, that I was the last person harmed in this process. So that's why it was important to me to enter my story in the system. Now I recognize that I'm coming from my own perspective, and there are men and women out there who have a completely different perspective, and mine is unique to me, and I understand that. But from where I'm sitting, that's how I felt in the process. And I think the system, as Jordan said, is not perfect. But when we put in another variable like this, which obviously there is a need for - it was created because there's a stigma around sexual assault - this gives the power back to the survivor or whatever the rationale is. But I think what we lose in this process is the fact that we've all been fighting so hard to reform, to make things better, and they have been getting better. I've seen it happen. And if we are not kind of focusing on continuing to make the process better, easier, and more comfortable for survivors, then we're not doing our job. If we're kind of distracted by these sorts of things, we're not putting the effort where it should be - in what we have and strengthening it, ensuring that it continues to evolve, it continues to meet the needs of survivors.

Tyler Raible [00:27:45] And Natasha, you'd mentioned earlier about this kind of common misconception that if you get the kit done at a hospital, then you automatically have to engage with law enforcement, and that's not the case. So Jordan, from- from your perspective, if someone goes into this thinking, I don't want to engage with law enforcement now, but they're looking at it as an option to engage with law enforcement later after using this kit, is that an option?

Jordan Satinsky [00:28:10] Realistically, as far as if somebody wanted to wait and use one of these kits, could we use them in the future? That- we can't put them into CODIS, I can't take anything from it that would help us get to the right person. I've been mulling over this for a long time trying to figure out how do you help it along to see if you can use this information to create your case and move it forward. But every time I keep coming up to this block where it would end up getting crushed in court under some sort of a fruits of a poisonous tree doctrine, when meaning that the evidence was obtained inappropriately, or if I have the evidence that the victim or survivor produced and it wasn't taken correctly, I can't put it into CODIS. I can't match it to anyone. It's unfortunate and it's going to end up, much like Marya and Natasha both said earlier, I'm going to end up retraumatizing my victim by even attempting to do this because I'm giving them that false hope that I can. And I understand the mentality behind it. I have- I'm not a survivor. I'm not begrudging anyone - if they ever did it or do it, that is a choice and I understand. So there's really not much we could use from the kit. If they kept their clothes, potentially we could use something. But again, there would be a lot of questions about that, about where it was stored, how it came from, length of time, things along those lines.

Tyler Raible [00:29:21] Absolutely. And I was kind of thinking, as you're explaining, you know, in terms of supporting survivors, how do you have a trauma-informed conversation with a survivor who has undergone an at-home kit?

Jordan Satinsky [00:29:33] So that's a great question, Tyler. And I think the- the best way to do it, you know, being sensitive to the topic, obviously, but also to be upfront about it,

not trying to make it confusing, not trying to make it colorful. Just be direct and explain that the criminal, this is how this works within the criminal justice system, and it's not something that anyone in law enforcement can control. These are the rules that were set up. There are, like you said, other avenues. Are there digital outside of this kit? Are there digital aspects we can look at as far as social media, cellular phones, emails, things along those lines, other witness interviews, text messages, things that we may be able to utilize to make this case? Potentially. But unfortunately, the items that are in the kit aren't going to be viable option. And outside of the criminal investigation, and hopefully I would have my victim advocate with me while having this discussion because I can't even imagine having to be the recipient of that news, is making sure that they get the assistance they need mentally first. My criminal investigation could wait. This needs to happen first. I've just told you, you thought in your head, this horrible thing happened, you thought you did the best thing that you could with what you had at the time. And now, I've just basically told you I can't use it. This is where Marya comes in. Hey, let's get this victim, this survivor to the right folks. Let's get them the right help. And if they're ready to go then and there, remember what I said earlier, victim-centered, trauma-informed. We'll go. But if they're not, I'm OK stepping back.

Tyler Raible [00:30:48] Yeah, that's perfect. So then, Marya, how do you support a survivor when it's possible the investigation might not go forward because of one of these at-home kits?

Marya Simmons [00:30:56] Giving them real-time information and support, being transparent about the details of the case. I think that there is nothing like being kept in the dark or having someone sugarcoat difficult conversations, as Jordan just talked about - that will damage trust and rapport with and further engagement with the victim. Having uncomfortable conversations are temporary, but the exasperated trauma that will boil over for victims of being left in the dark with thoughts of uncertainty, doubt, fear, self-blame, and isolation - commonly, victims may not tell anyone about their assault, as Natasha had discussed earlier. That can be debilitating. And so supporting victims of sexual assault as a victim advocate encourage me to fight with them through a system who often finds it easy to resolve sexual assault cases without a victim's input sometimes, and then dealing with the challenges of genuinely advocating for the rights and justice of victims and requiring that they deserve that empathy, the patience, and the fierce dedication to hold offenders accountable at the highest penalties. And being a voice for victims even when they don't have a voice for themselves through the process. So with that being said, that my famous motto is justice looks different for everyone. Some victims may not want their case to go to trial because they may not want to have to testify on the most intimate details of their lives. And that's OK. But being able to allow them that information to make those decisions for themselves on how they see their justice for themselves, whether that's going forward with the case or not going forward with the case, but having the professionals support them either way, that is very critical in supporting victims whether their case goes forward or not. When cases face challenges, and they're not going forward with the case, I made it my priority as a victim advocate to make sure that I contacted the assigned prosecutor and our law enforcement so that we could both communicate the news with that victim. Therefore, I was there to support that victim, and the prosecutor, and our investigator was there to answer any questions legally that I may not have been able to answer, but we were both there to support that survivor through that conversation, as difficult as it may have been. It's also about follow-up, meeting victims where they are and addressing those immediate concerns. It's about being authentic and genuine in every interaction that we have, no matter where we start. So it's, again, about communication in

real time and being able for those victims to see that there's a team behind them to support them.

Tyler Raible [00:33:29] So Natasha, how does a survivor reconcile this news? You know, how do they move forward towards their own justice in this capacity?

Natasha Alexenko [00:33:37] Well, I think it's really important to say that survivors who have done this at home, there's zero blame. I'm at least coming from a point of complete understanding. This is not something, you know, you didn't make a mistake. It's OK. I think that's an important point to make, and I don't think that anyone had like anything nefarious, whether creating these kits or whether taking them, I think everybody at the end of the day has, you know, the best interests of survivors in mind. And I recognize that that's where it's coming from. I also know not everyone has the luxury of having, you know, like I do at my access, and I have to say the individuals I'm- I'm fortunate enough to share this podcast with, they have a truth behind them. They don't have an agenda. You know, their agenda, they're mission-oriented toward survivors. And that's really true, and I wouldn't be here if that were not the case. Another excellent point that was brought up is just the follow up, and I was really fortunate to have that moving forward. You know, other survivors I've spoken to who's case- who decided to not even move forward with the case, they still had that follow up. They still had advocates calling them, contacting them, making sure they were OK, seeing what their needs were, even like financially. Those things are in place for a reason. Again, you know, I know I'm sitting in a luxurious position of having access to these experts who understand, and I know that if I didn't have this luxury, I, you know, I can definitely see why I, without the knowledge I have now, would take this route of doing something at home without knowing what is missing in the process, not just from a criminal justice perspective, which is important to me personally, but from all the other resources that won't be available to me anymore. And they're important to me, and I think they're important in the healing process, which to the survivor, outside of being a complaining witness, is the most important component is the healing, is the recovery process, and you'll be kind of left in the dark without those things. Not everyone is aware of what resources are available, though sometimes it's really beneficial to have what resources there are out there pointed out to you. You may not be aware. I was unaware of, for example, victim compensation - never even knew there was such a thing. There's one thing when you're kind of in the midst of trauma, of being given all this literature to kind of have to read through, but it's quite different when you have someone trauma-informed, looking you in the eye and saying this is what is available to you. And that kind of back and forth of someone seeing if you recognize what's out there and perhaps you're not ready to receive that information. But, you know, moving forward and again, the follow up saying, OK, perhaps you're ready for this now, this is what's available to you. But you know, the layman doesn't know what that is. I certainly don't know. And reading a piece of paper when you're in the middle of trauma, not being able to kind of absorb some of those details, I think is a detriment. And those resources are important and they're important sometimes very, very quickly, especially, you know, DNA evidence. Jordan mentioned clothing and that sort of thing, but, you know, anti-virals - that's necessary immediately, traumatic injuries you may not be aware of because you're in the midst of- of just feeling like in a state of shock, that's an immediate thing. There are things that these kind of at-home kits may not supply that are immediate, crucial needs.

Tyler Raible [00:37:01] So as we're- as we're kind of wrapping up today's episode, what's the one thing that you want everybody to know, at least from your individual perspectives? So Marya, could we start with you if that's OK?

Marya Simmons [00:37:12] What I would want the community to know is that these kits are not sick visit appointments, right? They are invasive examinations that require victims to collect evidence on every aspect of their bodies that remember was just violated and injured. Their power, their dignity, their control was stripped from them, and the ability to make a rational, informed decision may be distorted. Every victim has a choice and a right to make a decision that's best for them. And we, as professionals, can have our own opinions and beliefs on this topic, but it's important to weigh all aspects from a victim's perspective, a professional's perspective, and a justice perspective. And so consider these questions - how many offenders will return to communities to revictimize due to the criminal justice system not being able to pursue criminal cases because their cases were unintentionally compromised during evidence collection? How many victims will obtain the healing and resiliency, as Natasha has talked about, if we do not have those essential support systems in place - access and resources necessary before, during, and after their rape kit has been collected? How do we determine and evaluate if this is a trauma-informed process? What research and evaluation is being done to conduct or measure these results from a victim's perspective? There's nothing more valuable, right, than hearing from a victim's perspective. And as we know, going through and participating and watching the evolution of this rape kit initiative across the nation, what it has brought is the survivor's perspective, and it is so important for us to be able to incorporate and implement and allow victims to have their voices heard throughout this process, but also consider what policies are in place, and does this really go state-by-state or is this- there is an overarching goal and mission to be able to make sure that these victims are supported through this process outside of the accessibility and the convenience of these rape kits. There's just so many different perspectives that we need to consider and not just looking at it from one focus and one lens.

Jordan Satinsky [00:39:17] I want to start with, I echo everything Marya just said. I mean, that's all very, very excellent points, and I agree. From the survivor, I can only imagine, you know, here is something, much like Natasha said earlier, I could do in the privacy of my own home, by myself, and I don't have to involve all of us, all these strangers you don't know who are going to be peppering you with questions - hopefully not, but that's the vision. And this is going to sound strange, I want people to trust the system. I want people to trust the fact that we're trying to do the right thing. We're going to try to do everything we can to make it the best possible experience for the worst possible experience of their life, if that makes sense, and do what they want us to do. Unfortunately, those kits, if I could do anything with them, I would say I wish they would stop selling them just for the simple fact that it creates this secondary level of trauma. They miss out on so much. They've had this horrible thing happen. They miss out on so much of all the assistance they can get from the folks, from the victim advocacy group, from law enforcement, from the forensic medical team. These things are just lost when this happens, and then when they bring these at-home kits in with this hope in their head that, oh, now I can go find out who did this to me - especially if it's a stranger case, God forbid - now I can find out who did this to me, and the first thing they hear is, uh, there's nothing I can do, or I have very limited options. From my perspective from my silo in the world in this area, that causes issues for them where we're now giving this secondary trauma to them. And I would hope that there would be people out there in a narrative that would provide them a backdrop to say, "Hey, don't use these kits. Go find someone. Go to victim advocacy. Go to a forensic medical." You don't have to come engage law enforcement, that's fine. You can get an anonymous kit. Not a problem. And much like Natasha said earlier, it's in stasis in that aspect. If you want to call us later, call us. That's fine. Where I work in Maryland, I happen to have the luxury of not having a statute of limitations on these types of crimes. I know some states do. I don't. We are

seeing a national push to have that kind of change to either 20, 30 years or, much like Maryland, no limitation. So I'll wait. When you're ready, come see me.

Tyler Raible [00:41:14] Excellent. Thank you, Jordan. And Natasha, what about you?

Natasha Alexenko [00:41:18] Well, first of all, I appreciate innovation, especially when it comes to sexual assault. I think that's something that we absolutely need to focus on innovation. And you know, I- I think that these kits should really serve as a catalyst for how we kind of look at things - how do we integrate innovation into sexual assault? How do we educate the general public into the process? This should really start a conversation and a dialogue. This isn't something- a door that's being shut. This is a door that's being opened so we can have a conversation about this. How do we learn from this? What is the need? What is this resource trying to fill? How do we close the gap? And so I really hope that we continue to utilize this subject as a way to continue evolving and to elicit continued conversations. And I think that's with anything along the lines that comes into our sphere, a new thing. The only way we can kind of grow and change, and we must, is by taking these issues head on, having an honest and frank discussion that is putting survivors first, but also recognizing some of the hurdles. And then there's the necessity of the justice system and that it looks different for everyone. And again, it's really important to recognize, I don't think this comes from a nefarious place at all. I think that everyone is really looking out for the best interests. But we really need to recognize that we're a community here, and it's important for us to continue to have these discussions, to not eliminate a group from those discussions because as you can just hear here from the three of us speaking, we all have a really unique voice to add to this conversation.

Tyler Raible [00:43:01] Thank you, Natasha. And I think that's an excellent way to wrap up today's episode. So as we're closing out, first, I want to- I want to thank Natasha, Marya, Jordan, all of you for sitting down with Just Science to share your perspectives and to discuss these at-home kits, so thank you all so much for being here and taking the time out of your day to sit down and chat with me.

Marya Simmons [00:43:21] Always great to be here, Tyler. Thank you.

Jordan Satinsky [00:43:23] Thank you so much.

Natasha Alexenko [00:43:24] Looking forward to more conversations like this soon.

Jordan Satinsky [00:43:27] Me too. For those of you listening at home, on your car ride, or wherever you enjoy podcasts, if you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, go ahead and visit ForensicCOE.org. I'm Tyler Raible, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:43:50] This episode will conclude our Perspectives on At-Home Sexual Assault Kits season. Tune into the next season of Just Science on community relations. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.