

# SART

## Sexual Assault Response Team

Article and Photographs by:  
*Megan A. Peters*



Trooper Barry Cebulski, stationed in Bethel, reviews some training material during a presentation. More than 50 other professionals participated in the SART training. Presenter's showed power points, gave demonstrations and provided helpful exercises to the group.



SART training coordinator for DPS, Katie Tepas, speaks briefly to the participants. TePas has worked as a program coordinator, largely focusing on sexual assault and domestic violence issues, for 10 years.

Alaskans face the tragedy of sexual assault more than residents in any other state in the union. There isn't one type of victim. Crime statistics document men, women and children as falling victim to this disturbing type of crime. Statistics also show there is not an age barrier or a class that is immune to sexual assaults.

Sexual assaults have severely marred Alaska for generations. Alaska, for at least the past decade, led the nation in the number of forcible rapes against women per capita. The number of other types of sexual assaults is unacceptably high as well. While there is usually a primary victim in an incident, the crime doesn't just touch that one person. The illegal act causes a ripple effect that reaches across Alaska—from small villages to the big cities. Health professionals, law enforcement officials, communities and families come face-to-face with the devastating incidents more often than should ever happen.

"Alaska needs to make the decision that we are going to actively collaborate so we are no longer on the defensive. Until we do this, we will continue to be reactive [to sexual assaults]. We must go on the offensive," said Joe Masters, Commissioner of the Department of Public Safety.

To help combat the problem, Alaska State Troopers, municipal police officers, victim advocates and medical professionals gathered in Bethel—the major hub community in Western Alaska—for Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) training.

Nearly every person that attended the week-long training experienced first-hand the devastation caused by this particular crime and the offender. They've witnessed the physical and emotional trauma of the victim and collected the vital, and sometimes, shocking, evidence.

The training provides a more advanced look in to what

victims experience, what evidence needs to be sought and how to interview all the parties involved to get the maximum benefit of a solid investigation. The presented information is meant to compliment existing knowledge and skills the professionals attending the course already possess.

SART is a multidisciplinary team concept and is comprised of representatives of law enforcement, advocates and medical professionals. The team provides comprehensive medical-forensic exams, information and referrals, advocacy and criminal justice services to victims of sexual assault. The training also imparted information on what part the prosecutor's office plays in a sexual assault case. A prosecutor, while not a member of the core team responding to an acute incident, is actively involved in consequential steps such as warrant application, grand jury, trial and ultimately sentencing. They further provide significant guidance and direction to an investigation.

“By using the SART model, we are demonstrating our commitment to helping victims. When victims see the level of expertise and the multitude of services available to them, they are more likely to report the assault and access services,” said Katie Tepas, SART training coordinator for DPS.

Combating sexual assaults is a long term battle without a clear end in sight. Across Alaska, efforts are continuing to be made to educate the public about sexual assaults and the importance of holding offenders accountable. This step will go to great lengths in providing a safe and healthy environment for victims.

A part of the solution is truly taking care of the victim of sexual assaults by making them aware of the services available to them. Since its first application in 1994 SART has become the model of choice in dealing with sexual assault in Alaska. Why? Because the quick response time and the multifaceted approach allows the victims to tell their story once and allows the process to move at a speed comfortable for them.

“Many people who are sexually assaulted end up with post traumatic stress disorder and a myriad of health is-



ABI Sergeant Scott Briggs, stationed in Soldotna, did a power point presentation on sexual assault investigative techniques for the law enforcement officers that attended the training.

One subsection addressed effective tools for collecting evidence. Alternative light sources and filters makes it easy for law enforcement officers to find DNA evidence that can't be seen by the naked eye.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the alternative light sources, Briggs took the group into the men's restroom inside the facility. The demonstration was very illuminating, to say the least. DNA could be found on the walls, floor, sinks and even the light switches.

After the demonstration the group used up a large portion of the hand sanitizer that was available in the back of the classroom.

**“Solutions require change that must come from Alaska as a society. Individuals, families and communities must all become involved until everyone is clear that domestic violence and sexual assault will not be tolerated.”**

- Council for Domestic Violence and Sexual Assaults  
Legislative Task Force

sues. When victims are not able to access services, at no fault of their own, they may turn to coping mechanisms such as alcohol and drugs,” said TePas. “While much of the conference focuses on the importance of evidence collection and documentation, SART is also about helping a victim through the healing process so a victim can truly be a survivor.”

If victims are not provided the help and services they need and deserve, they may also experience depression and attempt or commit suicide. The impact of violence on victims can be lessened when they are supported by their family, the community they live in and society in general. The SART concept is designed to support the victims from all angles by providing advocacy along with the medical-legal process.



Troopers and other law enforcement officers pay close attention as Sgt. Scott Briggs presents information on sexual assault investigative techniques.



\*\*DPS is the main sponsor of the training. It is co-sponsored by Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, Bethel SART, Inc., Central Peninsula Hospital, Department of Law, Providence Health and Services Alaska, Standing Together Against Rape, Tundra Women’s Coalition and Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation. The training is usually conducted two to three times a year with its location rotating around the state. There is an effort to hold the training in both urban and rural settings to make it easily accessible to SART members statewide.