

22 July 2021

As an organisation we fully welcome and support the work in all themes of the **Women's** Safety and Justice Taskforce.

This paper supports theme two and three focus areas and has provided a way forward but by no means sufficient answers to the incredibly humiliating, re-victimizing, unjust and ineffective criminal justice system that exists for women who have been sexual assaulted. This paper supports:

1. The taskforce examining community attitudes to sexual offending against women and girls. *(Our community makes up our Jury)*
2. The taskforce examining the barriers to reporting sexual offending against women and girls.
3. The taskforce examining the initial police responses to reports of sexual offending against women and girls
4. The taskforce examining the police attitudes towards and decision to charge in relation to sexual offending against women and girls
5. The taskforce examining the role and potential role of sexual violence and mainstream services
6. The taskforce consider legislative reform and remove the provisions about consent and the operation of the excuse of honest and reasonable mistake of fact in the prosecution of sexual offences
7. The taskforce examining the role of the ODPP and their engagement with victims during the process
8. The taskforce examining the trial process with a focus on the particular needs of victims while ensuring the accused person has a fair trial
9. The taskforce examining the establishment of a Victims of Crime Commissioner – *this must clearly define sexual violence and a separate entity to domestic and family violence.*

This paper will

- Present a model of practice that has been developed in Townsville that strives to provide best practice responses to victims of sexual assault based on a trauma-informed framework. *Under resourcing and the powerlessness to change the justice remain barriers to best practice and best outcomes.*
- Provide some reflective practice comments from services on the model
- Provide case studies
- Provide feedback, reflections and stories from survivors

# Establishing a best practice response to victims of sexual assault in North Queensland



Townsville established a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) in July 2016. Initially the team was made up of the Queensland Police Service (QPS), Clinical Forensic Medical Unit (CFMU), The Townsville Hospital and the Sexual Assault Support Service with strategic partnerships with Courts, Victims Assist, Office of the Department of Public Prosecutions (ODPP), James Cook University (JCU), Defence, Townsville City Council, and the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS). In 2021, the team has included the ODPP as the survivors moving through the Justice system continue to require significant support from a team that places them at the centre of a trauma-informed framework.

SART is a multidisciplinary, interagency group of specialist professionals, established to work collaboratively alongside victims of sexual violence to provide a response that is sensitive, trauma and violence informed, holistic, and timely. The model of intervention uses a team approach to implement a coordinated, wrap-a-round, 24-hour support service for victims of sexual assault that reflect Queensland Government Interagency Guidelines. The services provided by SART are free and confidential to all victims, and span psychological; general and forensic medical; and 'judicial process' support needs, as requested.

## **Trauma and violence informed framework**

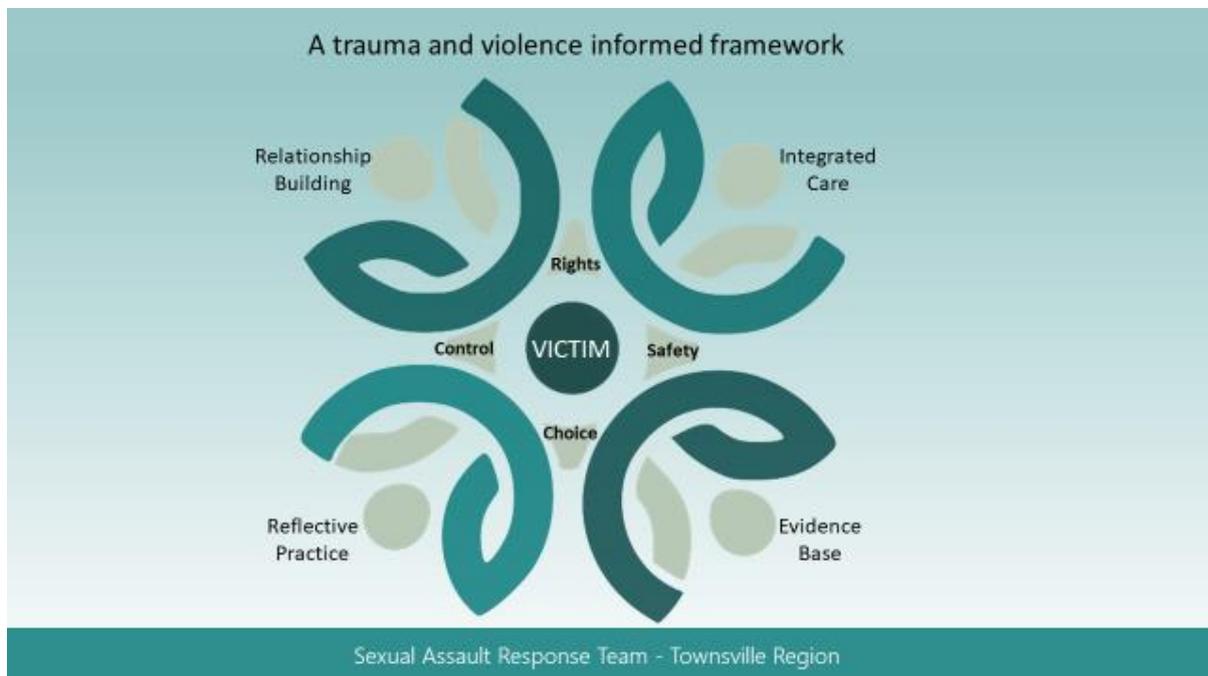
Trauma-informed perspectives have been foundational to the establishment of SART. However, with the continuation and ongoing development of SART, and the ways in which this language is so readily used, the team recognised the need for both individual workers and collective organisations involved, to more precisely understand and be able to articulate and employ, the specific 'trauma informed' framework from which we are working.

A 'trauma and violence informed framework' is considered most purposeful to the work of SART both individually with victims, and more broadly as a best practice model. *"Trauma and violence-informed care... accounts for the intersecting impacts of systemic and interpersonal violence and structural inequities on a person's life... so that problems are not seen as residing only in a psychological state, but also in social circumstances"* (Varcoe, Wathen, Ford-Gilboe, Smye & Browne, 2016).

*"'Trauma and violence informed care' expands on trauma informed care to bring attention to: broader social conditions impacting people's health; ongoing violence, including institutional*

violence; discrimination & harmful approaches embedded in the ways systems & people know and do things; and the need to shift services to enhance safety & trust”.

Below is the framework established for the Townsville SART



**SART: Victims of sexual violence at the very centre of all we do**

**SART responding to individual victims of sexual violence: rights, safety, choice and control**

**SART providing a model for best practice: relationship building; integrated care; reflective practice; evidence base**

**SART Leadership and Governance (locally):** Monthly SART Meetings; SART Working Group; Sexual Assault Strategic Partnership (SASP)

**SART Leadership and Governance (State-wide):** Queensland Government Interagency Guidelines Group; Queensland Sexual Assault Network; Sexual Assault Regional Leaders Group (SARLG)

*“The earlier an appropriate, specialist intervention occurs following sexual assault, the lower the risk of negative long term consequences – for the victim, their family, their community and society more widely” (QSAS, 2010, p. 22).*

The team has an established Terms of Reference, which articulates a number of issues including language; definitions of sexual violence; age of victims; gender; geographical area; accountability; and membership. Working methods are also clarified, including monthly meetings; the resourcing of secretariat assistance; an additional Working Group; and the central role of the Interagency Program Coordinator in facilitating the ongoing work and development of the team.

### **The victim presents**

Fundamental to SART, is the premise that all involved organisations present ‘as a team’, and respond to victims accordingly. A brochure has been prepared for use in this context. SART consent is obtained, enabling the purposeful sharing of information between involved organisations. SART consent aims to ensure victims are best supported, and ultimately do not need to continually ‘retell’ the trauma associated with their experience of sexual violence.

SASS Workers respond at the outset to all consenting survivors, to ensure they are fully supported both at the time of crisis, and throughout the processes involved. The early involvement of SASS ensures the increased likelihood that victims have access to on-going support, from the initial presentation, to potentially making a complaint, to the finalisation of the investigation, and for the longer-term, so as to meet their varied, individual needs.

Detectives acknowledge the distressing nature of the investigative process and seek to utilise 'trauma informed techniques'.

### **SART best practice principles to meet individual and broader community needs include:**

1. **Victim** (patient) centred model of care – rights, safety, choice and control
  - Prompt appropriate response to support victim within 30 minutes of initial presentation
  - Immediate medical treatment to address physical and sexual health needs as appropriate
  - Timely provision of support and information at initial presentation
  - Timely provision of forensic medical examination as appropriate
  - Dedicated professionals with specialist knowledge and expertise responding to victims
2. **Trauma** and violence informed framework underpinning effective practice as a team
  - Streamlining the process for victims
  - Limiting victims' retelling of the sexual trauma
  - Continued support of and follow up with victims throughout duration of all processes
  - Assisting recovery of victims with respect to their ongoing emotional health needs
3. **Key stakeholders** working collaboratively to respond and engage as a cohesive team
  - Clear pathways guiding workers across all involved services
  - Reflective practice to ensure ongoing consideration and review of service delivery
  - Provision of education to develop knowledge and awareness of health care professionals
  - Considered use of media to enhance community knowledge and awareness

### **SART best practice approach for organisations and stakeholders**

In addition to evident changes in the ways in which victims of sexual assault within our community are now afforded care, the establishment of SART has also progressed significant and meaningful change for all organisations central to this work

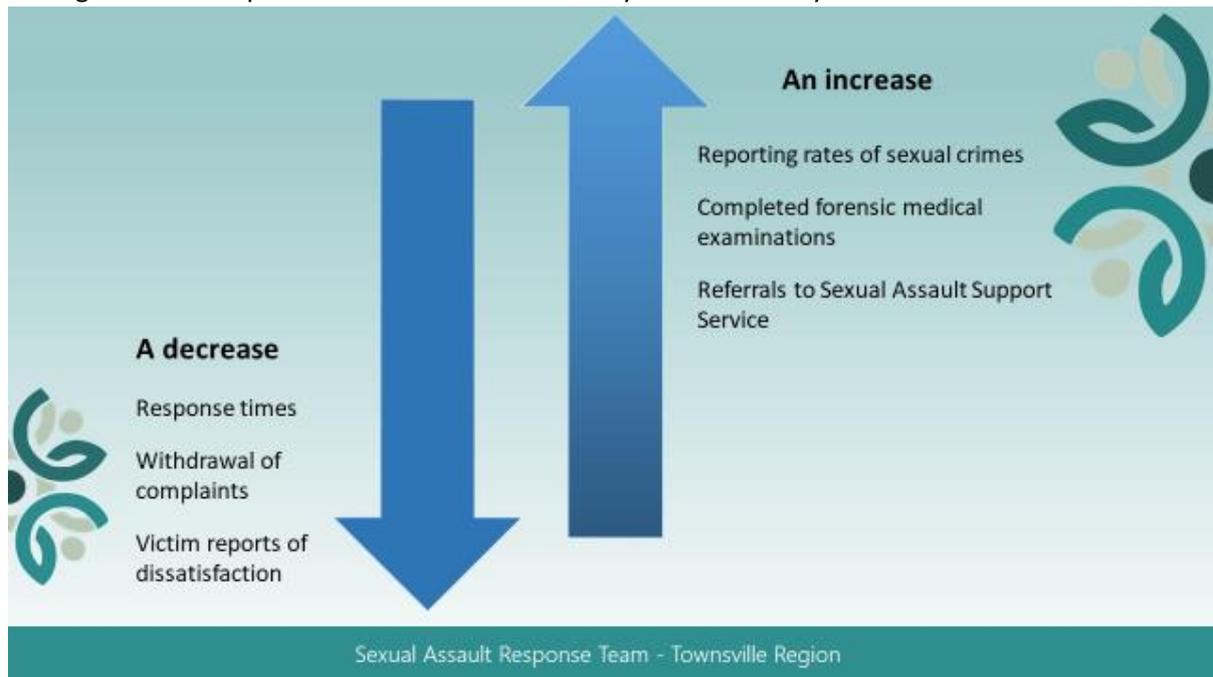
SART best practice principles to meet organisational needs include:

- Engaging 'whole of community' partnership in responding to need
- Enacting organisational Strategic Plans
- Patient centred
- Working with key stakeholders
- Increasing community confidence and satisfaction: response to crime
- Broadening community knowledge: National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women
- Improving use of organisational resources (cost benefit)
- Reducing unnecessary admissions to ED; length of stays; and burden on health system
- Increasing likelihood of forensic evidence

## The development of an evidence base and tentative current trends

The team is committed to accurate and reliable data collection and management, attentive to the various trends and needs associated with this work, in order to continually evaluate and improve upon, current service provision. As such, the joint database seeks to provide meaningful information and insight that can be used to inform the literature, research and ultimately broader policy and legislative change. Fundamentally, SART is committed to securing feedback from victims of sexual assault themselves.

The figure below depicts what has been consistently noted for five years



### Trends based on data and in comparison to the pre-SART period

- Increasing reporting rates of sexual crimes
- Increasing forensic medical examinations
- Increasing referrals to Sexual Assault Support Service
- Decreasing response times
- Decreasing withdrawal of complaints (particularly same day withdrawals)
- Decreasing victim reports of dissatisfaction (secondary victimisation/re-traumatisation)

### SART best practice approach to “Just in Case” Forensics

Concerns relating to

- language;
- lack of integrated care;
- limitations – not a complete forensic as per non Just In Case forensic medical;
- follow up likely to be unreliable
- Implications for investigation and prosecution given the lack of initial police involvement

*“What may be genuinely introduced in the context of ‘enhancing victim’s rights’, may well actually disempower them further...”*

## **SART best practice approach - Reflective practice**

In the context of data collection, the development of our evidence base, and ongoing reflection and evaluation of SART, there is a clear need for survivor feedback and qualitative data, and a firm commitment from all involved.

There has been much work to progress this aspect of our evidence base, alongside current developments regarding the quantitative data.

Reflective practice remains central to both the monthly SART meetings, and to the SART Working Group, that has worked to develop this presentation, and the ongoing work of the team more broadly.

## **Reflections from a Forensic Nurse**

Support provided to victims by SASS during their attendance at the hospital and CFMU has included:

- a. support while in ED prior to attending CFMU, listening to information provided by health professionals in ED and relaying that to victims and other SART staff as require, discussing options available to the victim and providing information around same, calling family and friends as requested, liaising with hospital social work department as required. Example; SASS worker in attendance with a victim in ED who had numerous injuries and required numerous investigations and a medical clearance prior to attending CFMU for forensic exam, SASS worker remained in attendance throughout the entire process and was able to relay to FNE information about tests etc performed in ED which made the process so much smoother.
- b. Awareness of SA pathways that are required to be completed in ED and advising ED medical staff who may be unfamiliar (often transient medical staff) of same
- c. Having the same support person present from the beginning to the end of the initial phase provides a seamless transition through each component of the process and provides consistency and reassurance for the victim
- d. At the CFMU support has included; physical presence and encouragement during the history collection component of the forensic process, provision of refreshments, assistance with attending to social concerns including child welfare and job commitments, sitting with the victim so they are not left alone while the FNE attends to documentation and other involved aspects of the forensic evidence process, sharing any concerns they may have identified with the FNE that may otherwise have been missed.
- e. In two instances the victim was already known to the SASS worker through the Women's Centre, this provided important insight into the victim's social situation and health care concerns which assisted with the forensic process. More importantly, this familiarity provided immediate reassurance to the victim.
- f. The presence of the SASS worker who will have an ongoing relationship with the victim allows the FNE to feel confident that the victim will not get 'lost to follow-up', that information regarding ongoing health care screening and support can be passed on to the SASS worker along with the client and that the SASS worker has the ability to then be in contact with the victim to endeavour to meet all ongoing needs.
- g. The SASS worker has provided information to the victim around financial assistance available through victims assist.

**The difference SASS involvement made to the victim. Provide specific case examples (non-identifying)**

It is clear that involvement of SASS is instrumental to a positive experience for the SA victim. The SASS worker provides much needed emotional support that other members of the SART team are not necessarily trained to provide or have the time to provide. For the FNE attention to detail during collection of information and specimens for the forensic kit is critical and can essentially impact the effectiveness and value of forensic evidence in court. The FNE does not have the time to provide much needed emotional support to the victim during the forensic collection process, there have been times in the past where I have had to leave a victim sitting alone while I complete paperwork, and this has been upsetting for both me and the victim.

It has been very common in the past for victims not to want any one in their family or friend circle to know about the sexual assault or to decline TTH social work involvement for numerous reasons. The immediate engagement of SASS ensures that women such as these are provided with immediate and professional support. It is clear that women who feel well supported are more likely to follow through with the judicial process and to recover quicker.

An examination I recently performed was the second compliant made by the victim against her ex-partner in less than 6 months. The first complaint was prior to commencement of SART. She had decided to withdraw the initial complaint but stated that she 'would go through with it this time'. She was very receptive to engaging with the SASS worker and accepting the support offered.

**The difference SASS involvement made to your work. Ensure you identify what was unique about the involvement of SASS.**

SASS has been instrumental in the smooth running of the seven forensic examinations that I have performed since the opening of SART in July.

I have worked with several SASS workers, these being Karen Rowan, Erin Costello, Belinda Vincent, Tiffany Goodman and Di Plumb. Each of these ladies has been professional, kind and supportive to the victim and the forensic process.

Having a support person present while the FNE collects the history of the assault has been known to be tricky in the past where that support person is not a trained sexual assault support worker. I have been impressed with the SASS workers ability to read each individual situation and victim and to know when is and is not a good time to interrupt and provide verbal supportive cues. The history collection component of the forensic process can be particularly draining and distressing for the victim as they are asked to replay in detail each aspect of the alleged assault. It can be difficult to witness this and the SASS workers have dealt with this in a professional manner and respected the work of the FNE.

Having SASS support also allows me as an FNE to have someone else who is present while I provide information to the victim, often the victim is not in a state to absorb a lot of detail around the forensic process, follow-up care etc so it is reassuring to know that the SASS worker will have ongoing contact with the victim and can pass on information at a later date.

The benefit of a dedicated SASS worker is that they are familiar with the SA response process; they know the other agencies involved and the expectations and limitations of each. Working with the same people on a regular basis allows for development of professional relationships between workers and organisations which ensures a best practice approach for the victim.

**Provide any other comments**

It is clear that SASS support is essential in providing a best practice approach to care of the SA victim. It will be interesting to see how these SA cases proceed through the judicial system with the benefit of SASS ongoing support. It would be an extreme injustice to these victims of crime if this service were not provided the appropriate funding to continue.

### **Reflections from a Police Officer**

In my experience the involvement of SASS has been crucial in supporting victims through the initial trauma involved with the offence and then the investigative process. SASS provides some very practical support in terms of providing a change of clothing to a victim who has undergone a medical examination in which all their clothing is seized for later forensic examination.

Additionally, the fact that the victim can have a neutral person present during the taking of the statement is invaluable as the victim feels supported and validated. Without this support many victims would not make it through either the medical or investigative processes which by their nature are quite invasive.

SASS has also provide ongoing support for the victims in terms of counselling services, ensuring victims can access victims of crime support, housing and where necessary emergency government payments. These are very real issues many victims face which the police do not have the training or established partnerships to facilitate in a timely manner.

The involvement of the SASS workers has allowed investigating police to concentrate on the investigation of the offences which are often time critical, while being confident the welfare of the victim is being attended to.

I have been a detective for approximately 17 years and I have mainly been involved in the investigation of child abuse and sexual offences. In my view the model whereby we have a SASS worker involved with the victim from the outset has been spectacularly successful and this is reflected in the comments by the victims and the significant increase in reporting of sexual crimes in the Townsville District.

Please describe the difference SASS involvement made to the victim. Provide specific case examples (non-identifying)

Police investigated the grievous bodily harm and rape of an indigenous women who was occasionally itinerant. The SASS worker was quickly able to establish a relationship with the victim who was wary of police involvement and speaking to police generally. The SASS worker was able to support the victim who quickly gained the confidence to undergo an invasive medical examination and speak with police in regards to the intensely personal offence which had been committed against her. SASS provided a change of clothes for the victim as this clothing had to be seized for later forensic examination. SASS also provided follow-up counselling to the victim which has assisted her in dealing with the trauma of the offence while remaining a viable witness in the prosecution of the offender. Without the involvement of SASS in this investigation it his highly doubtful the complainant would have proceeded with the victim. The defendant for this matter has a history of sexual offending and would still be at large but for the support provided by SASS to the victim allowing her the confidence to proceed with her complaint.

Describe the difference SASS involvement made to your work. Ensure you identify what was unique about the involvement of SASS.

As detailed above the involvement in SASS from the outset of the investigation has laid the foundation upon which the victim can have confidence they will be supported through the investigative process.

Prior to the involvement of SASS the victims of these offences were dealt with in isolation by the Police in many cases leaving the victim feeling isolated and unable to proceed with the complaint.

The involvement of SASS has supported victims, allowing them to have confidence in the support they receive and the investigative process. This has led to a very significant increase in reporting of sexual crimes in the Townsville district which is a very positive indicator of the benefit of SASS involvement.

#### Provide any other comments

In my view it would be of great benefit to the victims if they could be supported through the court process. I understand this is outside the current funding arrangements, however the court process is a very traumatic one for the victims.

If SASS were able to be involved through both the investigative and court processes it would be of great benefit to the victim and ultimately the prosecution as the victim is likely to be able to give better evidence in what is an adversarial environment.

#### Reflections from Emergency Department and Hospital

Case 1. SASS provided positive emotional and advocacy support to victim though limited due to patient's intoxication and EEO

Case 2. SASS provided positive support to staff at the supported accommodation facility where patient with a severe disability resided. Pt was not able to communicate with SASS due to her very limited communication skills

Case 3. SASS provided continuous support to patient from early disclosure to discharge from ED and after

Please describe the difference SASS involvement made to the victim. Provide specific case examples (non-identifying)

Case 1. SASS was effective in advocating on patient's behalf while patient was not coherent

Case 2. SASS followed up with staff who were affected by the abuse that had occurred to a disabled person in their care. Staff would not have had access to such specific support and understanding from another service if SASS was not available

Case 3. SASS quickly established a rapport with the patient and was able to remain with the patient throughout the forensic investigation.

Please describe the difference SASS involvement made to your work. Ensure you identify what was unique about the involvement of SASS.

Case 1. I was able to concentrate on other patients with the knowledge this patient would be followed up with appropriate support by SASS

Case 2. I was able to ensure that the staff caring for patient with a disability had access to specialised support and education following a shocking incident. This meant that I did not have to spend time on the phone arranging follow up support once patient was discharged

Case 3. I was able to facilitate the introduction of SASS to the patient and then withdraw. With the knowledge the patient had consistent specialised support during a traumatic time I was able to respond to a number of other patients. I wouldn't have been able to do if SASS were not able to assume responsibility for this patient's wellbeing and support

#### Please provide any other comments

My experience in working with SASS has been positive. SASS position has complimented ED SW position and in a collaborative approach has provided a smooth path for victims of sexual assault to follow. It is reassuring for ED SWs to know that these victims will have a consistent person to support them through an extremely difficult and confronting experience. The specialised knowledge and skills SASS staff have to manage such sensitive situations is integral for these patients and can minimise the long-term effects of such a traumatic experience. Ensuring maximum support and protection of a patient in such vulnerable circumstances is the ultimate goal of ED SWs

#### Reflections from a Detective and a Public Prosecutor

On the day of 2021, survivor had to attend the Townsville Magistrates Court for a Committal Hearing. The sole purpose of the hearing was for x to be cross examined.

Like most survivors x's path to closure and recovery has been very difficult. Going through the police investigation and court process is often draining and traumatic. Nevertheless, she has always spoken very highly of the support she received from your ladies (SASS Workers).

The day of the committal hearing was a hard one for her: She saw the offender for the first time in years and had to be cross examined knowing the importance of her evidence to the prosecutions' case.

I attended the court that day with x who was supported by SASS Worker. Unfortunately, I had other commitments so I was not present when x gave her evidence. However, the police prosecutor reached out to me and advised that x struggled to give her evidence but was able to do it and that it would not have been possible without Erin's support. Thus, on behalf of the Townsville Prosecutions Corp and our humble Historical Sexual Crimes Unit, I would like to pass on our appreciation for SASS worker's crucial assistance during the committal hearing and SASS Worker's ongoing support.

#### Survivor Reflections on SART

"...so relieved to have someone else to help 'fight' the system that has let me down..."

"...someone is on my side"

"I felt supported... believed and heard..."

"I did not feel so alone..."

Current, ongoing appraisal signals the development of a strong evidence base for a best practice model that recognises both the personal and social costs of sexual violence; reflects Queensland Government Interagency Guidelines; and ultimately 'gives voice' to all survivors, through dedicated service provision.

#### De-Identified Case Study (1)

Amanda has been engaged in counselling at the Women Centre. During a session, Amanda appeared to be nervous and very upset. Amanda disclosed that she was sexually assaulted by a man she had

met at the club over the weekend. Amanda was scared as this was not the first time she had been raped. She stated she was hesitant to get the Police involved as her experiences with the Police regarding her past sexual assault had left her re-traumatized and not believed. She narrated how the Police had blamed her for the abuse. Worker validated Amanda's feelings and provided her with information regarding her choices and rights to help her decide if she wanted to report or not. Worker also explained SART and support provided. Amanda then decided to make a formal report.

Worker contacted the Sexual Crime Unit to advise of Amanda's decision to make a formal report of the sexual assault. Amanda was supported by Sexual Assault Support worker to meet the detective from the Sexual Crime Unit at the Police station. The reporting process was explained by the detective as well as the collection of evidence through a Forensic examination due to the recent nature of the abuse. Amanda was made aware that she was in control of the process and central to it. Sexual Assault Support Worker stayed with Amanda, providing emotional support and reinforcing her rights and choices.

Amanda was then transported by the Detective from the Police Station to the Forensic Examination Unit at the Townsville Teaching Hospital. Sexual Assault Support Worker met them there. Upon arrival, the Forensic Examination nurse warmly introduced herself to Amanda and explained her role. Sexual Assault Support worker stayed with Amanda, providing emotional support while the Forensic Examination nurse explained the forensic examination consent form as well as the process involved in collecting swabs/samples and documentation of potential body injuries as a result of the sexual assault. Amanda was made aware that she was in total control over this and could stop the process whenever she wanted to. Amanda was also made aware she could have Sexual Assault Worker in the Forensic room, which she chose not to.

After the Forensic examination, an appointment time was arranged for Amanda to present at the Police Station to provide her statement. Worker supported Amanda to complete her statement.

A few weeks later, the Detective from the Sexual Crime Unit contacted Amanda and informed her that evidence was not obtained from the Forensic examination. Amanda was disappointment by this news. Counselling support provided a safe space for Amanda to talk about her feelings around this outcome.

Even though there wasn't enough evidence to proceed with Amanda's case, this is what she had to say about SART *"I am grateful for the support I received.. Knowing that I was going to be supported gave me the courage to report. The detective was so understanding and made me feel safe, unlike the detectives I had in the past who made me feel unsafe and blamed. "*

Amanda continues to receive counselling support as she re-establishes a sense of safety, connection to self and connection to the community.

## **De-Identified Case Study (2)**

Xenanthe is a 24 year old, non-indigenous woman who has engaged with The Women's Centre since early 2019. Xenanthe initially made an unrelated complaint to police, however a SART response was initiated due to the disclosure of acute sexual assault. This meant that a team including a Detective and a Sexual Assault Support Services (SASS) worker provided wrap around support to Xenanthe within 30 minutes. Following the SART response, Xenanthe continued to engage in counselling with her SASS worker at The Women's Centre till late 2019.

Therapeutic work focused on managing the resulting trauma responses related to the sexual assault, particularly as Xenanthe was in her final year of her university degree. Xenanthe also experienced

acute anxiety and panic attacks, which impacted her employment at the time. Consistent SASS support using a narrative, strengths based approach was used to support Xenanthe to explore her trauma experience and develop effective strategies to manage the resulting triggers.

As a result of her hard work and determination, Xenanthe successfully completed her university degree, maintained her employment and was subsequently employed in her field of interest following the completion of her studies.

Xenanthe reengaged in counselling with her original SASS worker late 2020 as her matter was due to appear in court early 2021. Xenanthe was required to give evidence so therapeutic work focused on developing strategies to support Xenanthe to manage the court experience. Using strategies and tools developed, as well as having her SASS worker present as requested, Xenanthe was able to give evidence, be cross-examined and have as much agency as possible throughout the court experience. The man who raped Xenanthe was charged as is currently incarcerated.

### **De-Identified Case Study (3) Post-Trial Insight from a Survivor**

As I waited for the phone call of an outcome, I paced and I prayed - oh boy did I pray! And I hoped. I didn't hope for much but I allowed myself to hope. When the call did come, I am certain that my heart skipped a beat. On answering, I could tell from the tones that the news was not good. But, of so many counts, I thought surely there would be something. The jury found him not guilty of all but 1 common assault charge - the only charge for which there was 'physical evidence'. I know I went into shock because I remember very little of the conversation.

In the days that were to come though, I went through the stages of grief. First, denial as I woke up the next day feeling what I'd imagine a hangover feels like; thinking that it was all just a dream and that I'd get the real call today. But, before I knew it, reality sank in and the deepest heartache and devastation took over me. It felt like I was in the aftermath of a disaster as I looked around and tried to make sense of everything. *3 and a half years - all the mountains and wrinkles we got over. Surely it couldn't end like this. Surely not.* I fought so hard... too hard... for it all to crash around me.

Over the coming days, my sadness turned to anger. Livid, fuming, anger. Anger at the world; anger at God; angry sadly at everyone I saw. Angry at the system, angry at the judge, angry at the Jury, angry at the defence lawyer and angry at **him**. It was nice for once to not be angry at myself. I knew though in the depths of my being that I did absolutely everything I could. There was nothing more I could have done. I fought the fight of my life. I spoke my truth with courage and conviction. I aired out every bit of my dirty laundry, opened myself to being questioned about every intimate detail of my life. I did everything I could so I couldn't be angry at myself. Everyone else though, absolutely.

Anger is not my favourite emotion, for obvious reasons, and it generally feels 'wrong' and uncomfortable to me. But, as I sat contemplating the injustice of someone so violent being declared innocent and free to go their own way, anger was the only emotion that felt appropriate. And, as I opened up a news page and saw 2 stories of similar charges being dismissed, another criminal being acquitted, my anger grew.

The system and the attitudes of our society need to change. Surely, there's been and there is some movement and great progress but nowhere near enough. We need to believe 'her' - every single woman who comes forward.

As someone now who has walked this system's road, I know that no one would choose to walk this journey. No one would choose to sit with multiple police - strangers and often men - and have to share intimate details of their assault(s). Having to answer personal and shame-inducing questions

about every single detail. Then police need to determine if there's enough to make a case and more times than not, because of the privacy of these crimes, there is nothing but the victim's word and it doesn't proceed.

For those who do proceed, a trial is an achievement in itself but it is certainly nothing to celebrate. Because, it is here that we have to tell another group of strangers (and again, often mostly men) in explicit detail all that happened. Then the victim needs to be questioned by the defence lawyer and the very aim of this questioning is to confuse/discredit/trip up/provoke the victim and challenge to the core their sense of self and their beliefs about what happened to them.

No one would go through this for a lie or a revenge plot. No one would put themselves through even more trauma - and believe me when I saw that the system can be more traumatic than the violence itself - if they didn't sincerely want justice for the wrongs done against them. So, why don't we believe her?

The defendant does not have to speak at all during their trial - that is their right. In my case, he was able to sit quiet the entire time. Why do we believe someone who is not even heard? Who chooses not to defend or fight for themselves, while we don't believe the victim who is fighting for dear life to be heard, to share their story and to defend their dignity in the process?

People need to understand the process a victim must go through. Only then will those same people who serve on juries fully be able to appreciate the 'hoops' and 'tests' a victim's story has gone through to get to that point.

I am grateful for the many women and men already at work to try and shift attitudes in society and make changes within the system. Women and men who are outraged at every single person's experience of violence. Women and men who believe victims. It is only because of some of these people I met along the journey that I was able to keep going in the pursuit of justice. These people gave me hope - that someone cared; that someone believed me and that if they believed me, maybe - just maybe - a jury would too. These people fought for me. They fought for justice; for my rights in various spaces; they fought for my voice to be heard; for me to have choices and control. More than this though, they fought for a safer community. It is largely - if not only - because of these people that survivors like me feel safe, supported and able to come forward and tell their stories and even contemplate walking this journey towards justice.

No one - NO ONE - should live with the hidden weight of these sorts of crimes and the shame that festers in the secrecy. But, victims/survivors are already reluctant to come forward because we know how society thinks. We know people struggle to believe us. We know - or at least think we know - just how gruelling the journey of reporting is and we know how hard it is to speak about these awful things.

If we want - and we should - victims to come forward, and we want safer communities, we need more of those men and women who are outraged, who do believe, who will fight for justice and who will provide a safe and supportive space in every place the journey takes a survivor so that they can find their voice and speak their truth.

I am eternally indebted to all those along the way who were able to be that before. It was only because of your support, your outrage - even when I couldn't feel outraged myself - and your gentleness in providing a safe space that I found hope: hope for justice, hope that I could do this, and hope that there were still good people out there.

*\*Postscript: I hope you know that that last bit is absolutely you, Trudi :) Again, I apologise for the length! But, I hope it was okay to share that with you. I don't think I will ever be able to articulate just how much of an impact having you and having people who were so supportive (in their own ways and roles - like Jen, Anne-Maree, Andy x2, Andrew and Frances) along the journey.*

### **A Letter from a Survivor to a Survivor**

Dear Survivor,

I am so deeply sorry that circumstances and experiences have brought you here in this space. However, I am so, so glad that you have made the brave decision to receive the support which you are so worthy of.

You do not know me, but I once sat where you sit today.

I was in a very dark place a lot of the time. When I wasn't in a dark place, I was in an imaginary place where I pretended that everything was fine so I could feel as though I had a grip on myself and my life, and it was not all a complete, broken mess. But trying to pretend and hold everything neatly together gets quite exhausting, as you might already know.

For a long time, I felt as though this idea of 'recovery' from trauma I experienced was some gimmick that I could not picture, let alone ever achieve. I hated the word 'survivor' because it felt like most days I was barely living let alone surviving. Perhaps you might know that feeling too.

I want you to know though that the trauma you have endured does not have to be what defines you or confines you to a life without joy. You are so strong and you have everything you need within you to make it through this. Look how much you have already survived and overcome to be sitting here today.

Now, the journey may often feel too long, too hard and too unfair to keep going. It may feel like it is consuming every part of you and your life and like no matter how hard you try, you are not making any progress - like you take one step forward and then something happens that catapults you back (or, so it can feel).

The journey to healing can and might feel like the most intense roller coaster, like the hardest fight of your life - for me it felt at times even more traumatic than my experiences of violence. The systems we can find ourselves in as we seek justice and/or healing can often disappoint us, fail us or fail to support us in the ways we need. This was certainly my case and I won't lie, it was extremely devastating for me. I was not able to see justice served in the way I had hoped. But, I do not regret my fight or my journey.

I know that might sound odd but despite the outcome, I have found an inner strength I never knew. I have found healing and new hope for the rest of my life. I found my voice. I spoke my truth. I was counted with the many other survivors who have gone before me and told their truth - hoping to be a small part of a bigger story of change in our community. I had so many people, like Trudi and others, who continued to believe me and fight for me and with me and who showed me that they genuinely cared and that I was never alone.

If I could give any encouragement, it would be to hold tightly to the messages you receive from people like Trudi or others who support you in these spaces. Hold tight to their believing you; to their belief *in you*; to their commitment to supporting you to heal and/or seek justice. These are the truths that

can often become buried beneath the messages we hear outside in the world or the false messages that our shame, our memories or our minds can tell us. It's not always easy but hold on to the truths that you hear and take note of all those who do support you because, when the journey in this space comes to an end (however that might look for you) they will be the little 'gems' that you take away and they will help you to keep going as you take each next step forward in your life.

Please trust that even when it doesn't look or feel like it, each step forward is taking you one step closer towards healing, justice, freedom, life - or whatever else you might hope to achieve through this journey.

We just have to keep taking those seemingly tiny steps one at a time, and one day, you will look back and suddenly realise how far you have come and how much you have overcome and survived. One day you will be very thankful that you chose to keep going, even when at times you didn't think you had any strength left in you or you couldn't see the road ahead.

I never thought that I would ever feel like 'myself' again, or feel 'normal' and I certainly could not imagine a life where my trauma did not follow me everywhere... yet here I am.

I want to encourage you that there is another side to this journey. 'Recovery' and life beyond the awful things that have happened is possible for you too. You may not be able to see it or hold onto that hope for now, and that is okay; so allow people like Trudi to hold onto it for you in the meantime.

Please know that you are never alone in this journey, no matter how alone you may feel at times. There are people, such as Trudi, who will support you each step of the way, there are many people fighting for justice and safety in our community, and there are survivors like me who believe you, believe *in* you, and are cheering you on.

Take a deep breath and know that you can do this and you are so, so worth it.

Wishing you love, joy and healing.

Sincerely,  
A fellow survivor.

#### **De-Identified Case Study (4)**

Jess came into contact with the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) to report a sexual assault that had occurred a number of months earlier. Jess had separated from a partner who had perpetrated many forms of violence for a number of years and Jess finally felt safe to make a report about the sexual violence that had occurred. Jess attended a police station where a SART response was initiated by the Sexual Crimes Unit (SCU). A Sexual Assault Support Service worker (SASS) presented to the station in order to provide a holistic wrap around response to Jess.

In the initial stages of the response, Jess provided a detailed statement to police to start an investigation process and SASS remained directly involved in this process in order to provide a specialised and individualised response to suit Jess's distinct circumstances. The presence of SASS at this time produced significant benefits for Jess in the ongoing and long term work that we engaged in for approximately 18 months.

Apart from the initial response that provided Jess with trauma informed emotional support and information, support and advocacy specific to Jess's circumstances, this work continued within the

context of trauma informed therapeutic counselling and support. With Jess's safety at the centre of our support and decision making, the services that we supported Jess to connect with included a high risk domestic violence team, Department of Housing, a specialised domestic violence service, Victim Assist and liaison workers within the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Jess continues to engage with SASS as the central advocate for the process happening around Jess at this time. While court processes proceed, Jess is consumed by the overwhelming effects of this process on her wellbeing and safety. We continue to work together and be responsive to the changing dynamics of Jess's safety and wellbeing. Jess describes this as a long process of feeling as though it is her herself that is on trial; Jess says this has made her feel further silenced and not believed; and that the process needs to change to not just be fair for her, but to be fair for both of us. Jess said that in the 15 months of waiting for the trial it has felt like a test for me to bow out, to see if I can last the distance and the trial just further silences me. Jess said, "There is so much more to this story".

Feeling frustrated and let down by this "justice" process, Jess and SASS are now working on other ways for Jess to seek justice and "have my story heard". By applying a narrative approach to our work with Jess, we have been able to consider creative and innovative ideas to have Jess take control of her voice and have significant people involved in this process hear the missing parts of the story in a different way.

Jess has identified the strength of this model for those reporting sexual violence. Jess considers how many times she might have bowed out had it not been for the responsive support and holistic team approach of SART.

### **ABC, January, 2020**

*"We can better support survivors in a multitude of simple, practical ways, most of which come down to resource allocation and priorities... having officers specifically trained in sexual trauma support and responses; making a fast-track list for sex crime matters so that these matters don't drag on for years and; having a support person for each complainant who stays with them throughout the process, from the police investigation through to the trial. None of this is rocket science... The only reason these practices aren't nationwide already is because sex crime still isn't treated like the insidious epidemic it is".*

***The work of SART has been innovative and new, testament to the commitment of all five involved organisations, and has entered a particularly hopeful time in paving the way forward to safeguarding the rights of victims of sexual violence, and improving both crisis responses and longer term support afforded them.***