

## Section 6: Conclusion

### Use Slide 1: Section 6 - Conclusion

We've covered a lot of material in this training. Before we leave today, I would like to summarize some key “take-away” points from the training and talk about some of the important implications that they have for our work.

Based on what we reviewed about the incidence and prevalence of sexual victimization, we know that it is a significant problem in our society, and that it can have a tremendous impact on victims, families, and communities. Yet unfortunately, we also know that reporting rates for sexual assaults are quite low. As we talked about earlier, victims have many unique reasons for not reporting, including fears and doubts about the criminal justice process itself. One of the implications, then, is that those of us who work in the criminal justice system – in fact, all of us who are involved in the sex offender management process – can alleviate some of these concerns by taking a more victim-centered approach to our work.

### Use Slide 2: A Victim–Centered Approach

A victim-centered approach to sex offender management takes into consideration victims' safety, needs, and interests at every step of the sex offender management process, and prioritizes and responds to those needs accordingly. It should begin at the point when individuals first disclose that they have been victimized – we must make sure that our investigative processes are sensitive to them and that our court proceedings do not re-traumatize them. I'm sure you've all heard of cases in which child victims were interviewed repeatedly by multiple parties, which causes them to relive and relay their victimization experience over and over unnecessarily. Or perhaps you've heard about cases in which the credibility of an alleged rape victim was called into question, or even when they were somehow blamed for what happened to them during the course of the trial. These are just a few examples that occur early on in the criminal justice process and that can have a significant impact on whether individuals will be willing to come forward when they are victimized.

**Trainer's Notes:** For more information on a victim-centered approach to sex offender management and ways to involve and collaborate with victims and victim advocates, please see *Engaging Advocates and Other Victim Service Providers in the Community Management of Sex Offenders* and *the Role of the Victim and Victim Advocate in Managing Sex Offenders: A Training Curriculum* at <http://www.csom.org>.

A victim-centered approach can also enhance the effectiveness of our intervention efforts with sex offenders throughout the criminal justice process. For example, when we collaborate with victim advocates and listen to the voices of victims, we can learn more about the offenders and their modus operandi, which can ultimately help us manage offenders more effectively. So the benefits of a victim centered approach are twofold – it allows us to be better informed and in a better position to manage sex offenders appropriately, and it gives us the opportunity to make participation in the criminal justice system – or in the sex offender management process as a whole – a more inviting, validating, and empowering experience for victims.

When considering the victimization data, we were also reminded that, contrary to commonly held myths, most victims of sex crimes are targeted by someone known to them – not by strangers. An associated implication here is that we really need to think about how we educate our communities about sexual victimization and how we approach prevention efforts.

In terms of the individuals who commit these crimes, we acknowledged that what we know about sex offenders is limited primarily to those who come to our attention in the criminal justice system. Even though sex offenders represent a significant and growing proportion of the individuals in our prisons and under supervision in our communities, they still represent only a fraction of the problem. Nonetheless, through decades of research on these known offenders, we've learned quite a bit about them. Perhaps most importantly, we have come to understand more and more that although the label of "sex offender" can imply that they are all alike, the reality is that they are not. Individuals who commit sex offenses do not easily fit into any one profile, either in terms of what they "look like" or why they do what they do.

As a group, they have some common characteristics and risk factors, but the extent to which any one offender has those characteristics or risk factors can vary considerably. In the same vein, the research has also helped us to see that there is no single "cause" of sex offending behavior. In fact, it seems to be quite the opposite. Sex offending behavior is not likely to be explained fully by any one single factor, trait, motivation, or characteristic, but rather by a multitude of interacting factors that may be present in differing degrees from one offender to the next. This also illustrates that sex offenders don't all follow the same "path" to offending. Rather, there are multiple pathways for individuals who commit sex offenses.

And this definitely has important implications for our work. It means that we simply cannot establish blanket or umbrella policies and practices for sex offenders as a group that assume that these individuals are all alike – "one size fits all" strategies, so to speak. Given what the research and professional literature tells us about sex offenders, we know that there is no simple solution for such a complex problem. The good news is that some of the research and literature on etiological theories, offense pathways, subtypes and typologies, risk

factors, and recidivism can help us think about our sex offender management approaches in a more tailored and refined manner. So let's talk for a moment about some more specific ways in which this might play out.

### Use Slide 3: Implications

- **Disposition/Sentencing.** Early in the criminal justice process, this kind of information can assist judges at the point of disposition or sentencing. For example, whether a period of community supervision is a viable option, and if it is, what types of supervision conditions might be most appropriate should depend – at least in part – upon what is known about that specific offender, including his level of risk and identified intervention needs. A comprehensive assessment can help answer those kinds of questions. Not every sex offender needs to be incarcerated, but then again, not every sex offender is appropriate for community placement. And it could be that if a sex offender is in fact sentenced to prison, perhaps the amount of time he is expected to serve should be a function of the nature of the crime and the identified risk to recidivate. In fact, in some states, sentencing guidelines for sex offenders are actually adjusted based on the assessed level of risk for sexual recidivism.
- **Treatment.** The diversity of sex offenders clearly indicates that our approaches to treatment should vary as well – a “one size fits all” approach simply doesn’t make sense, does it? Rather, based on a comprehensive assessment, treatment should be designed to address the varied motivations, predisposing factors, offense pathways, and specific intervention needs of sex offenders. And an offender’s identified level of risk should be considered when determining the level of treatment intensity, such as whether the individual should receive longer-term and more intensive interventions within a prison, or whether a shorter-term, more psycho-educational approach is more sensible. Furthermore, the individual targets of treatment should reflect the underlying factors believed to contribute to that individual’s offending behavior and that are related to the risk for reoffending in the future. We already know, based on a considerable body of research in the general correctional field, that outcomes are maximized and recidivism is reduced when we match offenders to interventions based on risk, needs, and other factors. And there is research to suggest that the same applies to sex offenders. For example, more intensive treatment has a better impact on higher risk offenders than it does on lower risk offenders. And for some sex offenders, there are specific changeable risk factors that – if targeted in treatment – are more likely than other kinds of factors to reduce their likelihood of recidivism. Again, this means that our interventions should be driven by good assessment information
- **Supervision.** From a supervision perspective, we know that because sex offenders have different risk factors, levels of risk, and needs and circumstances, the community management strategies we employ will need

to vary accordingly. For example, some sex offenders will require much more intensive supervision and monitoring, and support than others – namely higher risk offenders with high levels of intervention needs. And while some conditions of supervision may be applicable for many sex offenders, some specific conditions are more critical for some sex offenders than they are for others. Internet prohibitions, for example, are particularly critical for individuals who used the Internet to target children or to access pornography as a means of fueling deviant sexual fantasies, but may not be as relevant as a complete prohibition for some other sex offenders. Again, as is the case with other sex offender management strategies, decisions should be informed by comprehensive and quality assessment information. This applies not only to initial supervision plans that are developed when offenders are initially placed on probation or immediately following release to the community after incarceration, but also applies to the ways in which supervision strategies are implemented over time. Supervision officers should routinely be evaluating and reevaluating the levels of supervision offenders are receiving, the conditions that they must meet, and other management strategies that are in place based on their current risk and needs. We know that risk and needs can change – sometimes slowly over time, and sometimes very quickly. And as we reviewed earlier, researchers have identified specific risk factors or variables for sex offenders that are particularly important for supervision officers to monitor in an ongoing way. So conditions and strategies should be modified based on an individual offender's risk, progress in treatment, compliance with supervision, and overall stability.

- **Legislation.** Finally, just as a “one size fits all” approach to the treatment and supervision of sex offenders is not prudent and will not produce the best outcomes, creating broad-brush laws that attempt to address sex offenders as if they are all the same is not likely to be an effective strategy either – in terms of cost effectiveness or public safety. Sex offenders vary across a number of important domains, some of which relate to their likelihood of committing further sex offenses or other crimes. For example, we heard earlier today that some characteristics of sex offenders – such as the type of victims they target, whether they have been previously convicted of a sex offense, and whether they have deviant arousal or sexual preferences, to name a few – have implications for recidivism rates. So when we are considering mandatory prison sentences, lifetime supervision, GPS monitoring, residency restrictions, registration and notification, or other well intentioned strategies that specifically target sex offenders, what we know about the diversity of this population suggests that applying these laws in the same ways to every individual who commits a sex offense is probably not a prudent approach.

The bottom line with all of this is that we need to consider what the data tells us about different types of sex offenders and which strategies will lead to the best results in terms of public safety. Put simply, our approaches to managing sex

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offenders should be informed by the research about the nature and scope of sexual victimization, the heterogeneity of sex offenders, the costs and benefits of specific approaches, and “what works” to reduce recidivism. And researchers and other experts in this field are well positioned to help policymakers and practitioners understand these and other important issues as they critically examine our current policies and the ways in which they are carried out.

This brings us to the close of this training. Does anyone have any other questions?

I hope that you will leave today with a better understanding of what is known about this complex issue, and that this information will prompt you to consider some ways – above and beyond those that we’ve discussed today – in which the material that we’ve covered might impact your day to day practice in managing sex offenders.

Thank you for your participation.

**Trainer’s Notes:** Encourage participants to fill out written evaluations, and to submit these evaluations prior to leaving the training site.