



PRAXIS
INTERNATIONAL



BACKGROUND

Survivors of sexual assault across the country are reporting poor and unsatisfactory experiences with criminal legal intervention. Increasingly, communities such as Bellingham-Whatcom County, WA seek to apply the *Praxis Safety and Accountability Audit* (Safety Audit) process and tools to figure out what it is about that response that leads to missed opportunities for justice for survivors and accountability for offenders. In 2015, Praxis International¹ was funded by the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) to identify a team of national experts on audits and sexual assault criminal case processing to partner with and support a local team of practitioners to conduct a demonstration Audit of criminal legal system response to sexual assault.

In 2016, Bellingham-Whatcom County received funding to conduct an audit of their community's response to sexual assault to develop insight into the needs of sexual assault survivors from responding institutions. As a result of previous partnerships, Praxis and Bellingham-Whatcom County have agreed to collaborate to implement this national demonstration Safety Audit. The process will accomplish two goals; it will identify: 1) ways to improve local response to sexual assault in Whatcom County, and 2) new Praxis resources, tools, and strategies that will support more communities in enhancing their response to sexual assault.

¹ Praxis International is a non-profit organization seeking an end to violence against women and children. Since 2003, Praxis has been providing training and technical assistance to communities to analyze institutional responses to violence against women through the use of institutional analysis, community assessment, best practice assessment, and Safety and Accountability Audits.

WHAT IS A PRAXIS SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY AUDIT?

The Safety Audit is a tool developed by Praxis International, a non-profit organization working to end violence against women and children, for use by interdisciplinary groups and advocacy organizations to further their common goals of enhancing safety and well-being and ensuring accountability when intervening in cases involving violence against women. Its premise is that workers are institutionally organized to do their jobs in particular ways—they are guided to do their jobs by the forms, policies, philosophy, and routine work practices of the institution in which they work. When these work practices routinely fail to adequately address the needs of people, it is rarely because of the failure of individual practitioners. It is a problem with how their work is organized and coordinated. The Audit is designed to allow an interagency team to discover how problems are produced in the structure of case processing and management.

WHO CONDUCTS THE SAFETY AUDIT?

Typically, the Safety Audit is an interdisciplinary self-assessment tool. Communities conducting Safety Audits appoint local practitioners to a working group called the Safety Audit team. This team maintains responsibility for completing the Safety Audit process, making recommendations for improvement, and acting as ambassadors for implementation of those recommendations. The SANDA will also include a national audit team that includes Praxis staff and consultants as well as project partners bringing expertise in criminal case processing of sexual assault and Safety Audits: Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition, Mending the Sacred Hoop, Sexual Violence Justice Institute @ Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and Battered Women's Justice Project.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A SAFETY AUDIT?

The process involves examining whether institutional policies and practices enhance the safety and well-being of victims of violence against women, as well as enforce perpetrator accountability. The Safety Audit does not assess individual effectiveness or actions. The Safety Audit involves mapping the system, interviewing and observing workers, gathering information directly from survivors through focus groups, surveys, and interviews, and analyzing paperwork and other texts generated in the handling of violence against women-related cases. Recommendations coming out of a Safety Audit process are directed toward institutional changes that will enhance victim safety and well-being and perpetrator accountability.

HOW IS THE FOCUS OF A SAFETY AUDIT DECIDED UPON?

The Safety Audit focuses on a question that the community wants to explore. All Safety Audits are designed to look for how institutional responses centralize or marginalize attention to victim safety and well-being in case processing routines. Many communities want to conduct their Safety Audit through a particular lens. For example, one Safety Audit team representing over twenty community agencies asked the question, *“How do each of our interventions enhance or undermine battered women’s relationships with their children?”* Another community asked, *“What is the decision-making process that results in the removal, non-removal, or return of children in families experiencing the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment?”* Another community asked, *“What happens in the criminal justice system when native women report rape?”* Generally, Safety Audits ask, *“How does X process centralize or marginalize victim safety and well-being?”*

WHO SERVES ON THE SAFETY AUDIT TEAM?

The Safety Audit team typically consists of practitioners from agencies involved in the case processing under review. All Safety Audit teams have a significant presence of community-based advocates who have expertise in the dynamics of domestic abuse and/or sexual assault and a close relationship with survivors. The goal is to have an analysis that incorporates the knowledge of a cross section of people who work with these cases every day. Safety Audit team members must be committed to interagency cooperative work, confidentiality as agreed upon by the team, and an openness to find and fix problems without creating or deepening interagency conflicts.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?

The Safety Audit involves local team members who have access to sensitive information and records. Team members sign a confidentiality agreement that indicates their understanding that Safety Audit information is to be used and discussed only in reference to this specific Audit. They do not discuss details of cases with co-workers, friends or family. The Safety Audit team decides with approvals from their respective agencies on a process for handling and redacting case files. No individual Safety Audit team member speaks on behalf of the Audit without the team’s approval. Safety Audit teams may decide to make their work public or not. Individuals do not make that decision.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DO A SAFETY AUDIT?

The time required depends on the scope and focus of the Audit, the available resources, the availability of an Audit coordinator, decisions about how and when to collect data, and the ability of the team to spend some concentrated days on data collection. While each community's experience varies, many Audits are three to six months in planning, one to twelve weeks in the data gathering phase (depending on the ability to devote an entire week to this phase as a team), and three full days or three months of sporadic meetings to generate the main findings and recommendations of the Audit. If the team decides to generate a full written report as opposed to a written summary of the findings and recommendations the writing can take five to ten days. Many Audit teams choose to prepare a summary report in writing because of the time it takes to prepare a full report. Other communities sense that without a full report the Audit will not be taken up by policymakers in a meaningful way.

WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES OF A SAFETY AUDIT?

- Discovering gaps in safety and well-being and accountability within the case processing systems under review, i.e., answering the "Audit question."
- Specific recommendations for system change that enable community partners to close the discovered gaps.
- New expertise in a process that can be used for ongoing community planning, evaluation, and problem-solving.
- New ways of community partners to work together.

WHO CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SAFETY AUDIT?

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