

Sexual Assault Response Network Program and Committee

Update for the Law and Justice Interim Committee, March 2026

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The 2023 Legislature established the [Sexual Assault Response Network](#) (SARN) Program and Committee at the Montana Department of Justice (DOJ) Division of Criminal Investigation Office of Victim Services via House Bill No. 79 (HB 79), sponsored by Rep. Amy Regier.

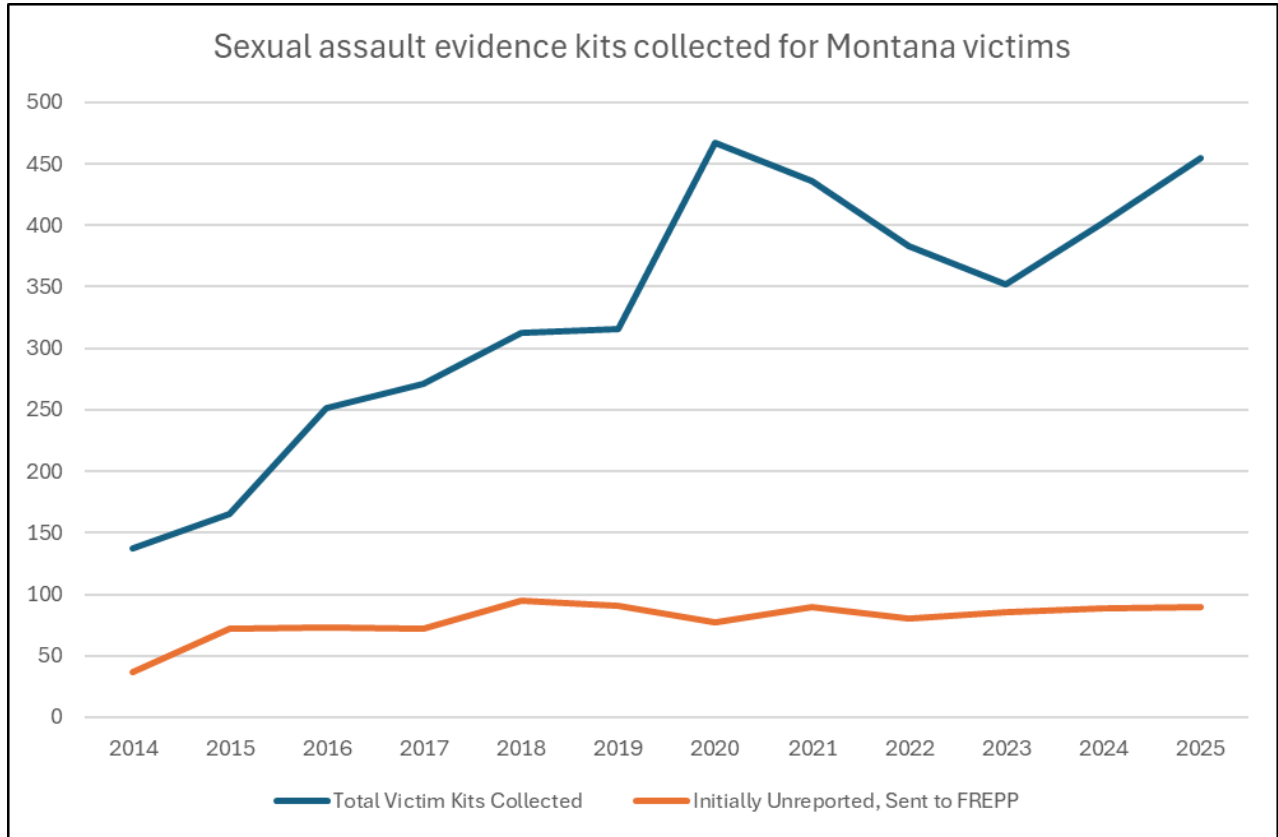
The SARN Program's responsibilities include:

- sexual assault evidence kit production and distribution to healthcare facilities across the state;
- administering the [Montana Sexual Assault Kit Track System](#), established in 46-16-405, MCA, to prevent backlogs of untested kits;
- administering the [Forensic Rape Examination Payment Program](#) (FREPP), established in 46-15-413, MCA, which:
 - stores sexual assault evidence kits not reported to law enforcement for 75 years from the date of collection or until the victim decides to report; and
 - reimburses healthcare facilities for the cost of collecting the kit, up to \$600, per ARM 23.15.402;
- administering the [SARN Committee](#);
- providing technical support and training for sexual assault responders. Current offerings include:
 - for forensic examiners:
 - quarterly virtual continuing education forums;
 - synchronous, virtual 40-hour Montana-led Adolescent/Adult Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner didactic course;
 - partnering with the Montana State University Mark and Robyn Jones College of Nursing to provide federally funded asynchronous didactic courses and in-person clinical skills practicums for pediatric, adolescent, and adult sexual assault care;
 - for prosecutors:
 - quarterly virtual peer roundtables;
 - annual in-person training*;
 - for law enforcement:
 - periodic in-person training*;
 - online investigation curriculum accredited for 10 POST credit hours;
 - assisting with basic officer victim interview training scenarios at the Montana Law Enforcement Academy;
 - for victim advocates:
 - providing periodic virtual training through the Montana Board of Crime Control and virtual and in-person training through the Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

*This year, SARN is co-hosting a joint in-person training for law enforcement and prosecutors at Fort Harrison May 13-15 with the DOJ Prosecution Services Bureau, the Montana Board of Crime Control, and the Department of Corrections.

Sexual Assault Evidence Kit Collection

Since SARN’s inception, sexual assault evidence kit collection has significantly increased in Montana. According to Kit Track System data, healthcare facilities collected nearly 30 percent more kits in 2025 over 2023. The number of kits reported to law enforcement at the time of collection also increased 4.6 percent during that same period.



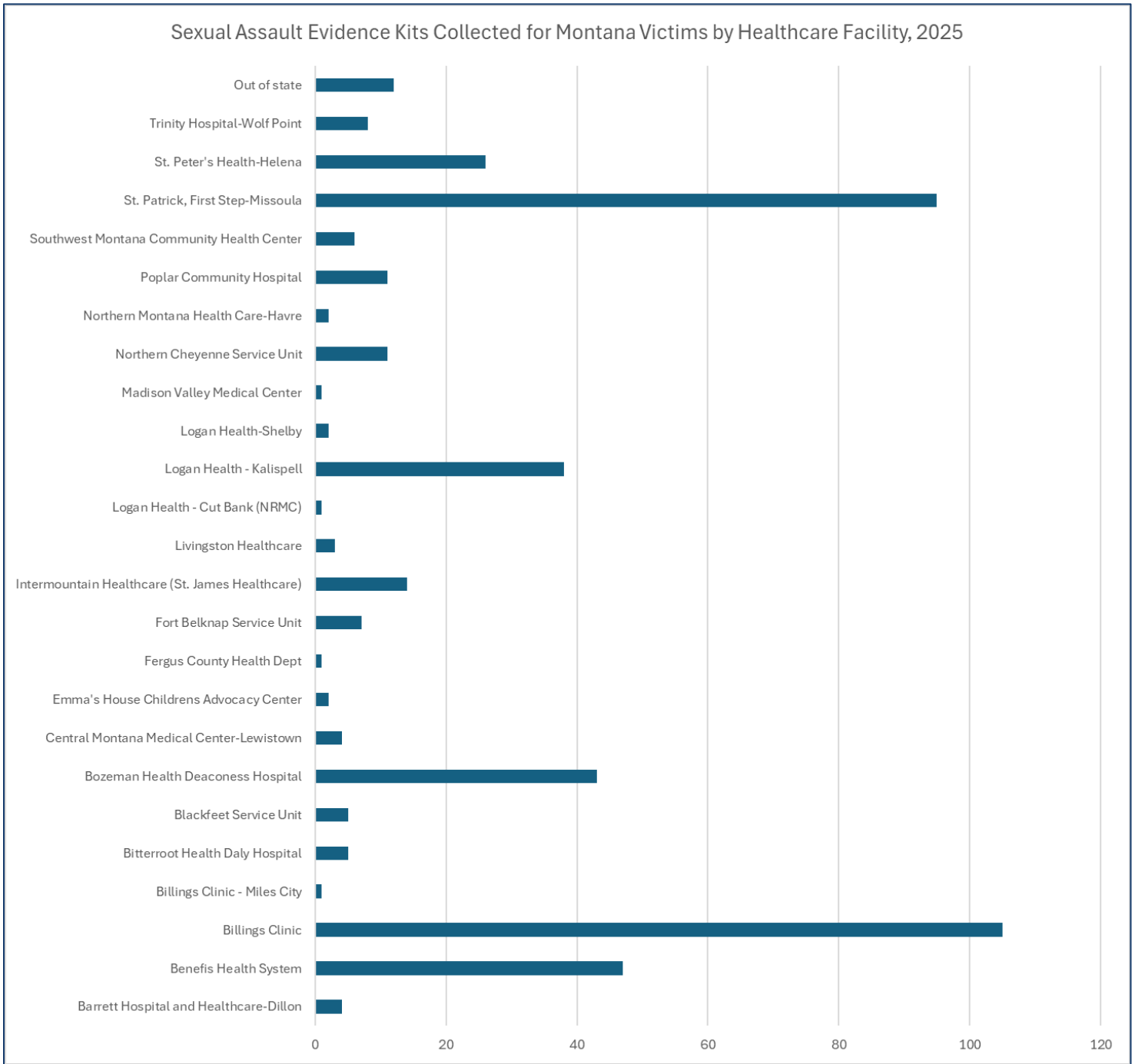
Source: Montana Sexual Assault Kit Track System

Sexual assault evidence kits collected by month for victims in Montana													
	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	Total/Year
2025	Green	Green	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	455
2024	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	402
2023	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	352
2022	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	383
2021	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	436
2020	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	467
2019	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	316

Source: Montana Sexual Assault Kit Track System

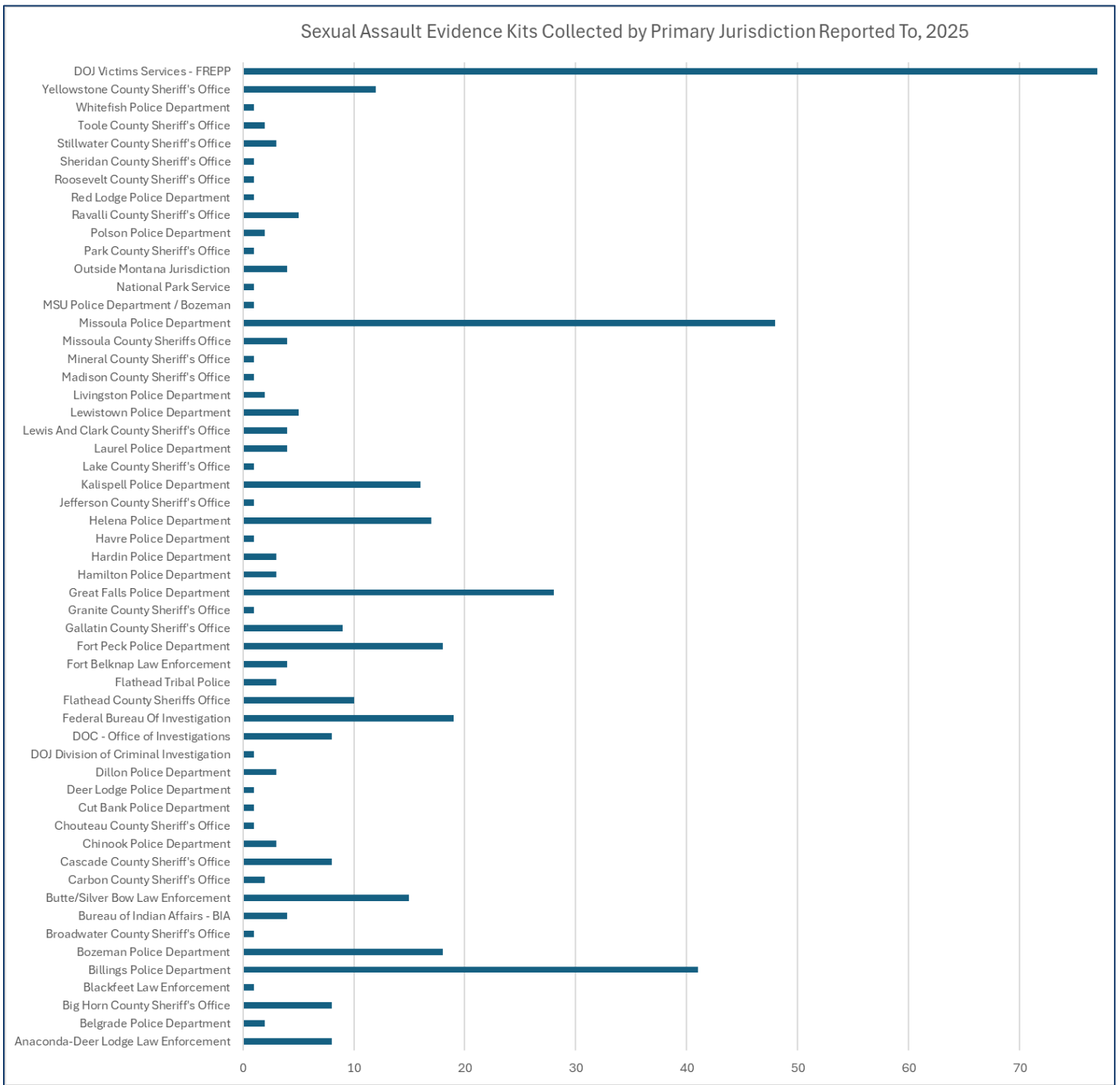
Rather than a surge in sexual assaults, SARN attributes the increase in kit collection to multiple factors including increased outreach to victims at local and statewide levels and increased availability of sexual assault forensic exams resulting from revitalized trainings for forensic examiners in Montana. As a result, Montana is likely closing the gap on the number of victims who seek medical care after an assault.

In 2025, kits were collected at 24 healthcare facilities in Montana.



Source: Montana Sexual Assault Kit Track System

Healthcare facilities transferred those kits to 54 city, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies.



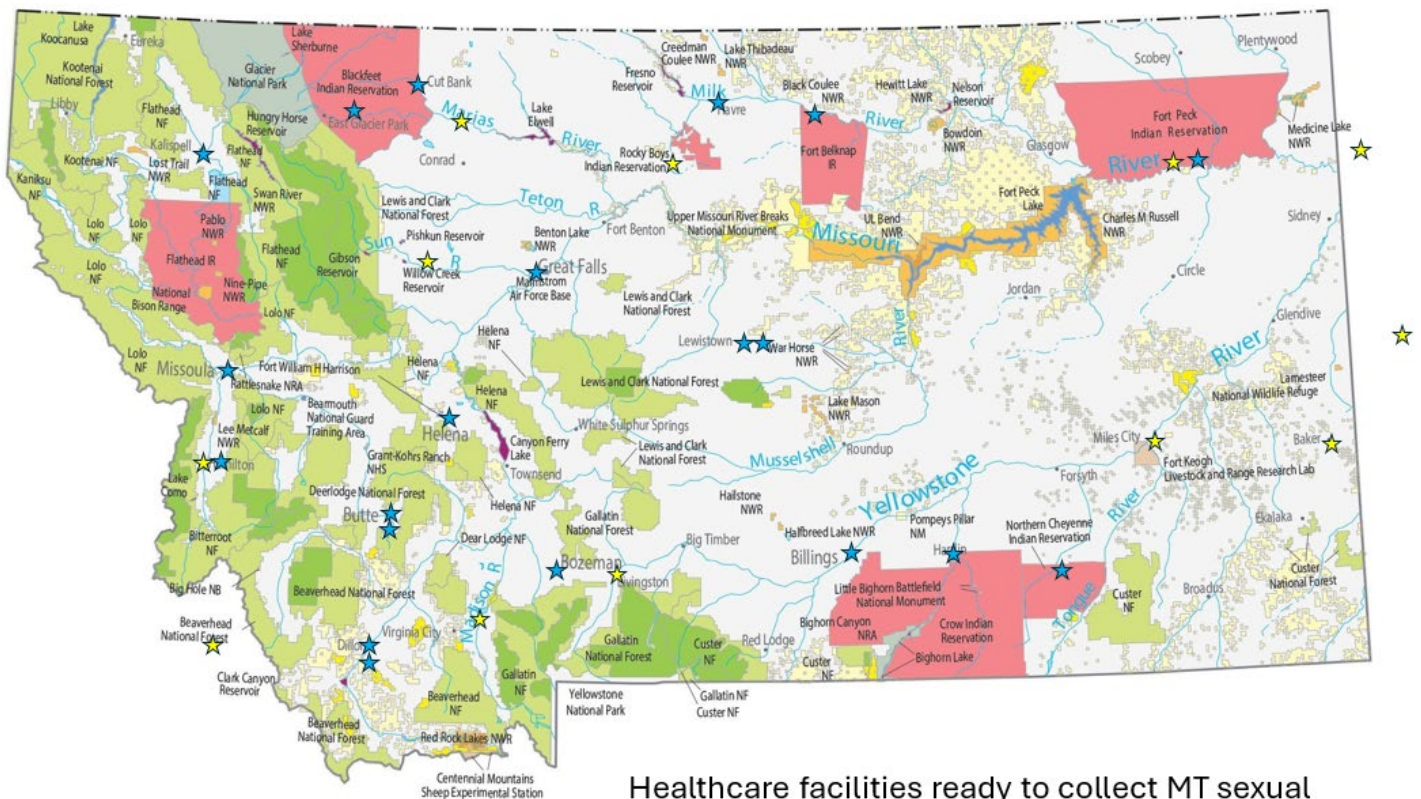
Source: Montana Sexual Assault Kit Track System

Increasing Access to Forensic Care in Montana

Increasing equitable access to quality sexual assault care is a primary goal of HB 79. Since Spring 2024, the DOJ has partnered with Montana-based trainers to offer two 40-hour synchronous online didactic courses for adult/adolescent sexual assault forensic examiners. A third is scheduled for Fall 2026. Funding for these courses came from a combination of a one-time federal grant and the Johnson & Johnson Settlement monies.

The Montana State University Mark and Robyn Jones College of Nursing (MRJCON) also provides nurses enrolled in its MSU SANE Scholars program access to the International Association of Forensic Nurses online didactic course and to in-person clinical skills practicums. These are funded by a \$500,000 federal Health Resources and Services Administration grant received by MRJCON in July 2024. The grant expires in June 2027.

The combined efforts of SARN, MRJCON, and the participating Montana trainers, healthcare facilities, and examiners have resulted in the availability of Montana sexual assault evidence kit collection at the added locations highlighted by yellow stars in the graphic below. Locations with blue stars already were and continue offering Montana evidence kit collection.



Healthcare facilities ready to collect MT sexual assault evidence kits, February 2026

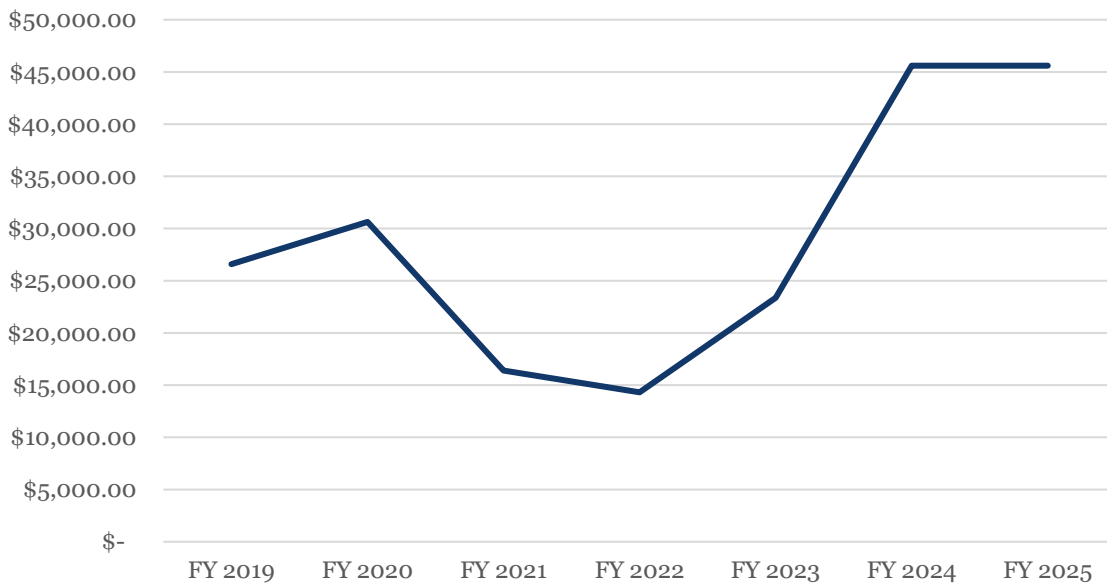
★ = since January 2024

Payment for Sexual Assault Forensic Exams

Per 46-15-411, MCA, the local law enforcement agency within whose jurisdiction an alleged incident of sexual intercourse without consent, sexual assault, or incest occurs shall pay for a victim's sexual assault medical forensic exam when the exam is directed by the agency or when evidence obtained is used for the investigation, prosecution, or resolution of an offense.

The 2005 Legislature established that the DOJ Forensic Rape Examination Payment Program (FREPP) pays for exams in cases that are *not* reported to law enforcement, since the federal Violence Against Women Act prohibits victims from being charged for the cost of the exam.¹ Since 2005, FREPP has reimbursed healthcare facilities for those exams, up to \$600, using state general funds appropriated to the Crime Victim Compensation Program. This same money is also used to pay for the production and distribution of Montana sexual assault evidence kits (about \$10,000/year) as FREPP has never had a dedicated budget. This comes at the expense of reimbursing crime victims for eligible crime-related expenses.

FREPP Payments to Healthcare Facilities
by Fiscal Year



The maximum amount paid by FREPP per exam has not changed since the program's inception. The reimbursement rate is far lower than actual costs incurred depending on the extent of the victim's injuries. The average cost of 47 detailed exam invoices received by FREPP in 2023 and 2024 was \$2,090.

Of 12 high-volume exam facilities surveyed by the SARN Program in January 2025, only one charged law enforcement agencies more than \$600 for an exam. Some charged less or not at all. Responses from 13 healthcare facilities surveyed by the SARN Committee in August 2025 indicated they routinely write off hundreds to thousands of dollars in expenses per exam. The facilities reported that adds up to thousands, and tens and hundreds of thousands, of dollars in unrecovered expenses per facility per year depending on their exam volume.

¹ Pursuant to 46-15-411(3), victims may still be charged for the treatment of injuries.

FREPP Reimbursement Rate Review

The 2023 Montana Legislature tasked the SARN Committee with reviewing the FREPP reimbursement rate. In February 2025, the SARN Committee reviewed Montana’s payment structure and a June 2024 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on how other states pay for sexual assault forensic exams.

The GAO report found 32 states directly pay healthcare facilities for exams and eight more states pay if the victim is uninsured or for expenses not covered by insurance. Counties pay in four states (Kansas, Arizona, Hawaii, and South Dakota). In New Jersey, Nevada, and California, counties or law enforcement pay but are reimbursed from state funds.

The GAO report revealed Montana and Colorado are the only states in which law enforcement pays for sexual assault forensic exams without the opportunity for reimbursement from the state. (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024)

The GAO report also found that when states pay, 23 use a combination of federal and state funds while two exclusively used federal funds and 18 exclusively use state funds (including Montana).

Thirty states cap the amount they pay. Colorado’s is the highest at \$5,000 per exam. Nebraska and Iowa have the lowest at \$500 per exam; Montana and Alabama are next lowest at \$600 per exam. The average cap nationwide is \$1,355 and the median is \$1,030.²

Legislative Considerations

During the 2025 Session, Senate Bill No. 491 (SB 491), introduced by Senator Bob Phalen at the request of a sexual assault forensic examiner in his district, sought to create a single payor system for sexual assault forensic exams. As amended by the House Judiciary Committee, the bill would have transferred \$800,000 in marijuana tax revenues to DOJ each year to pay for all exams; law enforcement would no longer be billed. The bill passed the Senate unanimously on 3rd reading; it also passed the House unanimously on 2nd reading but was tabled by House Appropriations on a 12-11 vote after extensive debate. Some Appropriations Committee members expressed reservations because the proposal was not included in the DOJ budget review process and because lawmakers had not heard from law enforcement agencies that exam payments were a concern.

Senate Bill No. 537 (SB 537, 2025) proposed dedicating 1.5% of all marijuana tax revenues (an estimated \$832,000 in FY 2026) to DOJ for the payment of sexual assault forensic exams. As written, SB 537 did not repeal law enforcement’s requirement to pay for exams reported to them. The House Taxation Committee amended the bill to coordinate it with SB 491 so that the single payor system would be adopted if both bills were passed and approved. The governor ultimately vetoed SB 537.

SARN Committee sexual assault forensic exam payment review highlights:

- In Montana, law enforcement pays for sexual assault forensic exams reported to them; the Forensic Rape Examination Payment Program (FREPP) pays for those not reported to law enforcement.
- FREPP’s maximum payment of \$600/exam is among the lowest in the nation and equals less than half the average cap nationwide.
- Montana is one of only two states in which law enforcement pays without the opportunity to be reimbursed by the state.
- The FREPP program hasn’t increased its \$600 exam payment cap since the program’s inception in 2005.
- Adjusted for inflation, \$600 in 2005 would equal \$989 in 2026.
- The average cost of a sexual assault forensic exam in Montana is \$2,090.

² Utah and Virginia were excluded from these calculations because their exam payment caps are subdivided.

Law Enforcement Feedback

In response to the questions raised by the House Appropriations Committee, SARN formally surveyed 105 non-tribal, non-federal law enforcement agencies across the state in May 2025, asking how they currently pay for sexual assault forensic exams. Of the 38 that responded, 42 percent had not paid for an exam in the preceding year. Seventy-one percent said they used general agency/organization budget funds to pay for exams. Eight had dedicated line items.

When asked what happens if exam invoices exceed the budget or available funding, most agencies reported taking the money from another area of the budget or asking municipal or county leaders for increased funding. One entity reported that as a small agency, “payment for these exams can be more than we can afford. They end up taking money from our training budget to cover these costs.”

While most of the agencies reported being charged \$900 or less per exam, two said they have paid \$1,500 or more for an exam. Thirteen agencies said they pay the full cost of the exam, no matter the cost. One respondent said, “We were charged several thousand for a juvenile sex case. It was \$3,000 for a regular sexual assault kit. We simply cannot afford these charges. I do not want crucial investigative steps to be missed due to budget. . . These used to be for free, but we are now being charged for them.”

Other feedback received from law enforcement agencies through the survey included:

- “I think its [*sic*] ridiculous that we have to pay for [exams]. This is needed to collect evidence and to help the victim. If there is a small agency that doesn’t have the money for one, they may not do an exam because of the money. That is not fair or right for the victim. [Our hospital] usually doesn’t have a SANE nurse on so they have to call them out, that isn’t an agencies [*sic*] problem.”
- One agency called it an “unfunded mandate” that hurts small police departments, prohibiting them from using the funds for additional patrols, saying “we never know how many sexual assaults may be reported and this is difficult to budget for.”
- Two other agencies advocated for state funding specifically and a third said it is looking for other ways to cover the cost of exams as “our budget is tight as it is.”

After reviewing the agencies’ responses at its June 2025 meeting, the SARN Committee expressed support for moving toward a single payor system in which the state would be solely responsible for the cost of sexual assault forensic exams. Committee members said a single payor system would both alleviate financial pains for law enforcement and significantly simplify billing for healthcare facilities.

The SARN committee will continue to discuss potential legislation for restructuring Montana’s payment system at its February 27, 2026, meeting.

SARN Committee Members

As appointed by Attorney General Austin Knudsen in April 2024, the SARN Committee includes:

Terms Expire December 31, 2026

Heather Black Forensic Nurse Consultant Billings Area IHS	Whitney Brothers Forensic Nurse Coordinator St. Peter's Health, Helena	Capt. Anthony Honeycutt Lewistown Police Department
Brett Irigoien Dawson County Attorney Glendive	Jordan Kilby, Esq. Missoula	Emily Mangas Forensic Nursing Program Coordinator, Bozeman Health
Christina Powell CEO Help Center, Inc., Bozeman	Kodi Tall Bull Medical Director All Nations Clinic, Missoula	Bret Taylor Information Security Manager DOJ, Helena
Ben Uhlich Vice President, CNO and COO Intermountain, Peaks Region Miles City		

Terms Expire December 31, 2028

Eldena Bear Don't Walk Conflict Defender Div. Administrator Office of State Public Defender Missoula	Jamie Bray-Tanner Biology Section Supervisor DOJ Forensic Sciences Div. Missoula	Brenda George Executive Director Children's Alliance of Montana Billings
Sgt. Cara Guderian Great Falls Police Department	Mark Horn Manager Billings Clinic Telehealth Services	Selene Koepke Assistant Attorney General DOJ, Helena
Susan Parker Program/Finance Director Red Bird Woman Center, Fort Peck		

Sexual Assault Response Related Acronym List

CAC:	Child Advocacy Center
CODIS:	Combined DNA Index System
CVC:	Crime Victims Compensation, a service of the Office of Victim Services (OVS)
DOJ:	(Montana) Department of Justice
DCI:	Division of Criminal Investigation (at Department of Justice). Houses the Investigation Bureau in which the Office of Victim Services is located.
FREPP:	Forensic Rape Examination Payment Program
IAFN:	International Association of Forensic Nurses
MDT:	multidisciplinary team – a community team comprised of healthcare professionals, advocates, law enforcement, prosecutors, mental health and child protective services particularly used in cases involving children and adolescents.
MNCASA:	Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault – free resource on SARTs
OVS:	Office of Victim Services, located within the Investigation Bureau at the Division of Criminal Investigation within the Montana Department of Justice
RAINN:	Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network is the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization
SAK(SAEK):	sexual assault evidence kit
SAKI:	Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (federally funded)
SAFE:	sexual assault forensic exam/examiner
SANE:	sexual assault nurse exam/examiner
SANE-A:	sexual assault nurse examiner certified by IAFN for adolescent/adult care
SANE-P:	sexual assault nurse examiner certified by IAFN for pediatric care
SARN:	Sexual Assault Response Network Program, housed within the Office of Victim Services (OVS). Administered by the SARN Program Coordinator at DOJ.
SART:	Sexual Assault Response Team – a community team comprised of healthcare professionals, advocates, law enforcement, prosecutors, particularly used in cases involving adolescents and adults.
SARN Committee:	the statewide Sexual Assault Response Network Committee established by the 2023 Legislature to consider improvements to sexual assault response in Montana holistically and programmatically. Administered by the SARN Program Coordinator at DOJ.
SORNA:	Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act
VAWA:	Violence Against Women Act (federal)