

# Building Strong Partnerships Between Rape Crisis Centers and Corrections Agencies:

## *A Case Study from West Virginia*

In 2014, the West Virginia Regional Jail and Correctional Facility Authority (Jail Authority) and the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services (FRIS) embarked on a project with Just Detention International (JDI) to bring emotional support services to jail inmates who have been sexually abused.

The Jail Authority and FRIS had worked together previously, but the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards — federal rules issued in 2012 to address this violence — opened up an opportunity for deeper collaboration. JDI's role was to help facilitate the relationship and give expert guidance on the PREA standards, which require detention facilities to ensure that sexual abuse survivors in their custody can get outside help.<sup>1</sup>

The project was a success: today, survivors of sexual abuse in West Virginia's jails can get high quality victim services from outside counselors. The story behind this groundbreaking work — and especially the challenges that were faced along the way — can be instructive for detention facilities and rape crisis centers alike.

### **Establishing the Partnership**

Unlike most jails, which are run by county agencies, West Virginia's ten jails are managed by the state's Jail Authority. FRIS is comprised of the state's rape crisis centers, which are independent community organizations. The executive directors for the rape crisis centers make up FRIS's board of directors. At the project's outset, FRIS, the Jail Authority, and JDI held a series of meetings and developed a contract establishing the parameters of their collaboration. With a contract in place, FRIS started to develop a plan for delivering services to inmates — no easy task, as its member centers were already overstretched with requests for services from sexual abuse survivors in the community. Meanwhile, the Jail Authority updated its policies on inmates' access to confidential support services and began preparing the jails with new procedures and tools to ensure these services were implemented in a meaningful way.

The Jail Authority's new policies affirmed that any incarcerated survivor in a West

Virginia jail could receive sexual abuse crisis services, either by phone or in person. But the specifics of how those services would be provided — and each partner’s roles and responsibilities — needed to be clarified. The Jail Authority and FRIS, with help from JDI, worked together to develop a template memorandum of understanding (MOU) to do just that. Facility-based PREA Compliance Officers and rape crisis center directors used that template to create their own individualized MOUs for each local partnership throughout the state.

Once the MOUs were signed, the work on the ground could begin. With the help of JDI, jail staff were trained on the services the rape crisis centers would provide for inmates, and inmates were educated about those services and how to get them.

### **Challenges and Problem-Solving**

#### ***Capacity***

While a handful of advocates expressed misgivings about working in jails — and particularly about serving clients who may have committed violent crimes, including rape — the most common reaction to the prospect of helping incarcerated survivors was one of enthusiasm. Advocates recognized that inmates are a marginalized population, and that most incarcerated sexual abuse survivors were not getting the help they needed to heal. Also, while jails were unfamiliar territory, the work itself was not. As one advocate explained, “We serve all victims, so this was nothing new to us.” It helped that several centers knew

the corrections officials at their local facility because they had already been providing sexual abuse group counseling at the jails. In addition, some advocates had previously provided hospital accompaniment to incarcerated survivors.

FRIS determined that the most effective way for the state’s rape crisis centers to help incarcerated survivors was through their existing hotlines. The centers, however, were worried their staff would be overwhelmed by the additional calls. They decided to make their hotlines available to inmates only during business hours — which, as it happens, is when most inmates can make phone calls. In the end, hotline staff had no trouble managing the volume of calls from incarcerated survivors, which was relatively light. In addition, rape crisis centers have been able to keep up with requests for other services from survivors — including hospital accompaniment and follow-up counseling.

Crucially, the rape crisis centers negotiated to receive stipends from the Jail Authority to cover their staff time for training and providing services. While such arrangements are rare, it is worthwhile for advocates explore with corrections agencies whether funding may be available to support their work. For example, some agencies reimburse rape crisis centers for their travel to the facility or the hospital.

To address advocates’ fears about working with incarcerated survivors, FRIS organized a multi-day training. Co-led by JDI, the training focused on the dynamics of sexual abuse in detention and how to adapt services provided

to survivors in the community to survivors in jails. Advocates found it helpful to work alongside their colleagues from other rape crisis centers to discuss challenges, share expertise, and develop a uniform approach for their work with incarcerated survivors.

### ***Confidentiality***

Throughout the planning stages, FRIS and the Jail Authority discovered that it was relatively easy to find common ground — even on confidentiality, a topic that could have driven a wedge between the two partners. Survivor confidentiality is a foundational principle for the anti-rape movement. It is also written into the PREA standards, which state that corrections facilities must ensure that those in their custody have “reasonable communication” with outside victim services organizations “in as confidential a manner as possible.” The standards further require officials to inform inmates about any facility rules that limit confidentiality, such as staff listening in on inmate calls.<sup>2</sup>

Some corrections officials are wary of providing inmates a confidential channel to the outside world, especially to discuss a crime that happened inside their facility. There are also technological obstacles to confidentiality; most prisons and jails simply are not set up to allow private, unmonitored communication to outside advocates. Fortunately, the Jail Authority and FRIS were able to agree that inmates could contact rape crisis centers through a free, confidential line. Because the jails’ existing phone system permitted staff monitoring,

the Jail Authority worked with its phone service provider to add a blocking feature to the network; the Jail Authority created a pin that, when entered, would direct the caller to their local rape crisis center through a line that was unmonitored and unrecorded. JDI and FRIS also worked with jail officials to secure private spaces for inmates to make phone calls, away from phones in busy, noisy common areas — where most phones for inmates are located — and out of earshot of fellow inmates and staff.

There are some limits to confidentiality. Under West Virginia law, and consistent with their ethical obligations, advocates are required to report clients who express a credible intent to hurt themselves or others. The Jail Authority and FRIS agreed that advocates would notify the facility PREA Compliance Officer if they had reason to believe there was a threat of imminent danger.

The Jail Authority educated its staff about the changes in phone policy and the services the rape crisis centers would be providing. In addition, as agreed upon in the MOU, jail staff placed posters with instructions on how to call the hotline, including the pin that directs inmates to a confidential line, in areas visible to inmates. Flyers and other written materials about the services were also distributed to inmates and staff.

### ***Hospital Accompaniment***

Early in the project, the partners found that hospitals in West Virginia were inconsistent in contacting victim advocates to accompany

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sexual assault survivors during forensic exams. Many hospitals routinely called their local rape crisis center to request an advocate prior to conducting such an exam, but some did not.

The Jail Authority and the centers developed a simple way to address this problem: since staff at the jail were already calling the hospitals before transporting a victim for a forensic exam, they simply added a call to the rape crisis center as part of their standard procedure.

A more complex problem involved hospital jurisdictions. Under existing agreements, some of the jails were sending inmates to hospitals located outside of the service area of their local rape crisis center. To complicate matters further, some of the hospitals that served inmates did not have Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs) or other staff who were trained to perform sexual assault forensic exams.

In response to the jurisdiction problem, rape crisis centers created an informal alert system to ensure all survivors are able to have an advocate present during forensic exams. If a rape crisis center receives a call about an incarcerated survivor being sent to a hospital outside its service area, staff contact the center serving that area, thereby ensuring that an advocate can respond in a timely manner.

For its part, the Jail Authority revised its procedures to ensure that all survivors are transferred to the nearest hospital with SANE nurses on staff.

## Ongoing Barriers — and Tips for Overcoming Them

### *Staff Turnover*

Despite the project's successes, some challenges remain. There is high staff turnover at both the jails and the rape crisis centers, which makes it difficult to sustain the progress that has been made. At the two-year mark of the project, more than half of the facility PREA Compliance Officers had been promoted to new roles; a number of the rape crisis centers had changed Executive Directors. The transitions were fairly seamless in some cases, and other staff have stepped in to continue the work. However, partnerships such as these are based largely on relationships between key people; when staff leave, it can create a void that is hard to fill.

One way to avoid setbacks during staff transitions is to develop small teams to manage the project. When there are a handful of top people at the jail and at the rape crisis center responsible for working together and maintaining project commitments — rather than single contacts at each — it is more likely to be sustainable. Staff teams ensure that key knowledge isn't lost and relationships don't lapse when one or two people leave, and are more likely to provide effective training to new staff who join the project.

### *Communication*

A successful program to provide outside victim services to incarcerated sexual abuse

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survivors depends on strong communication between the corrections agency and the rape crisis center, with designated contact people at each. In West Virginia, the key staff at the jail and the centers were in touch regularly, and this close working relationship continued after the project's end. Nonetheless, there have been times when a contact person was not available to respond to an urgent request, which can be frustrating. While it is unrealistic to expect that every phone call or email will receive an immediate response — especially when both partners are juggling so many tasks — it is always a good idea for detention facilities and rape crisis centers to share contact information for back-up staff in the event of any emergencies.

### Keys to Success

No collaboration is perfect, and cracks are likely to emerge when both partners are chronically overworked and underfunded. However, the West Virginia project has shown that rape crisis centers and corrections agencies — two budget-strapped entities that have vastly different cultures — can work together successfully. At their core, advocates and corrections officials care about the well-being of people in detention who have been sexually abused. They share a goal of helping incarcerated survivors return to their communities with a greater chance of living healthy, productive lives. It is not always easy, but as the West Virginia project shows, it is possible to make sure that sexual abuse survivors in detention facilities can get the help they need and deserve to heal.

## Endnotes

1. National Standards To Prevent, Detect, and Respond to Prison Rape, 28 CFR 115 (Department of Justice, 2012), “Access to outside support services,” §§ 115.53, 115.253, 115.353, available at: [www.federalregister.gov/d/2012-12427/p-766](http://www.federalregister.gov/d/2012-12427/p-766)
2. Ibid.

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*This project is supported by a grant awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed herein are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime.*

