

## **No Bad Victims: Why Rape Crisis Advocates Should Work Inside Corrections Facilities**

Sexual abuse in detention is a nationwide crisis. Every year, 200,000 people are subjected to this violence. Even worse, few survivors receive the support they need to begin healing. Chronically underfunded and understaffed, prison mental health services are not equipped to offer meaningful support. Staff often have no training in sexual abuse, and may only be available to inmates with a major mental illness diagnosis. And even in facilities that do provide adequate care, services are not confidential; many survivors will choose not to seek help to protect their privacy or because they fear that doing so would make them a target for retaliation.

The good news is that there are now more opportunities than ever for inmates to get high quality, confidential victim services from community-based rape crisis centers. This crucial shift is due in large part to the national Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards<sup>1</sup> — a landmark set of rules that call on facilities to work with outside counselors — and to the reversal of a government rule that prevented local organizations from using federal funds to help people in custody.<sup>2</sup>

### **Everyone Has a Right to Be Safe**

Rape crisis advocates are uniquely qualified to provide victim services to sexual abuse survivors in detention facilities. The same skills that advocates apply to their work in the community — active listening, supporting survivors in developing coping skills and safety plans, and providing information about reporting and referrals — are just as effective behind bars.

However, some advocates have been reluctant to deliver services to incarcerated survivors, for a variety of reasons. Some are concerned about having a client who is a sex offender or who has committed some other heinous crime, including against one of their clients in the community. Some may have fears about their personal safety. Another common worry is that corrections officials will put up so many barriers that providing effective services becomes impossible. Some advocates may believe they should not provide crisis counseling to prisoners if they can't offer the full range of supportive services that are available to survivors on the outside.

These concerns are valid — prisons and jails are not ideal settings for advocates. Detention facilities tend to be loud, chaotic, and dangerously overcrowded; it can feel uncomfortable, even scary, to spend time inside of one. Everyone has a right to be safe at their workplace; if an advocate believes they are at risk, they should tell the corrections agency and their employer.

Yet it is also important to keep in perspective the dangers of working behind bars. Corrections officials tend to be extremely protective of outsiders — it's part of their job to keep visitors out of harm's way, and any security lapse would reflect badly on them and their colleagues. What's more, inmates are not the aggressive, violent caricatures depicted in pop culture. They recognize that visiting sexual abuse counselors are there to help them, and often feel personally invested in counselors' safety.

While advocates can usually count on corrections agencies to create a secure work environment, some officials may put up roadblocks to service delivery. This is especially true when it comes to facilitating confidentiality. In small communities, in particular, advocates may very well find themselves faced with an incarcerated survivor who needs their help, and who they know has also hurt people in their community. And corrections officials may permit rape crisis counselors to provide some services, like hospital accompaniment, but not others, like a 24-hour hotline — which can be deeply frustrating to advocates who are committed to providing all survivors with the same level of high quality services.

Overcoming these challenges can require a significant investment of time and persistence. Yet rape crisis advocates have faced such challenges before. Years ago, it would have seemed unthinkable that advocates would have strong relationships with law enforcement agencies, forensic examiners, and prosecuting attorneys; today, sexual assault response teams are common in communities nationwide. Similarly, advocates have successfully fought for greater access on university campuses and military bases, expanding options for survivors. Prisons are arguably tougher and more hostile than other institutions, but, as advocates, our priority is to reach those who need the care, and especially in places where that need is dire. The anti-rape movement has long been guided by the belief that sexual abuse is never okay — period. For decades, those of us in this movement have had to counter the toxic notion that some victims have it coming — that how much person had to drink, or what they chose to wear, meant they somehow were not worthy of the same help and protection as the rest of us. The principle that there are no “bad victims” is absolute; it applies to all people, even those who may have committed a crime. As such, the question for advocates must be not *whether* to provide services to incarcerated survivors, but *how* to do so.

### **Bringing Healing Behind Bars**

In recent years, sexual assault programs and coalitions have ramped up their services for prisoners. Advocates are giving confidential, in-person counseling — one-on-one and group sessions — to help prisoners cope with

trauma. Many agencies are also providing crucial support through letter-writing and even via crisis hotlines. Just Detention International launched a dedicated sexual abuse hotline for inmates — the first-ever of its kind — through a project run jointly with the Michigan Department of Corrections.

When advocates bring direct services inside detention facilities, it does more than help survivors — it changes the entire culture of a facility. The presence of outside advocates can break through the extreme isolation and secrecy of corrections facilities. Advocates can also take on more formal advisory roles, whether it is training officials on sexual abuse prevention and response or educating inmates about their rights.

Prisoners are members of our communities, even if their lives are hidden from view. And just like any member of our community, prisoners deserve to be safe from sexual abuse — and to have access to quality rape crisis services.

## Endnotes

1. National Standards To Prevent, Detect, and Respond to Prison Rape, 28 CFR 115 (Department of Justice, 2012), available at: [www.federalregister.gov/a/2012-12427](http://www.federalregister.gov/a/2012-12427)
2. Victims of Crime Act Victim Assistance Program, 28 CFR 94, (Department of Justice, 2016) available at: [www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/07/08/2016-16085/victims-of-crime-act-victim-assistance-program](http://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/07/08/2016-16085/victims-of-crime-act-victim-assistance-program)

### **JDI Contact Information**

#### **Los Angeles Office**

3325 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 340  
Los Angeles, CA 90010

(p) 213-384-1400

#### **D.C. Office**

1900 L St. NW, Suite 601  
Washington, DC 20036

(p) 202-506-3333

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