

Tips for Responding to Calls, Letters, and Emails from Incarcerated Survivors

Generally speaking, in providing services to incarcerated survivors you will follow the same basic principles as when you provide such services to survivors in the community. And yet, working with prisoners is sometimes challenging; men and women in detention lack privacy, have limited access to phones, and may seek help through letters. Here are a few tips on how to work with these uniquely vulnerable survivors.

Responding to Calls

Respond to calls from incarcerated survivors as you would any other hotline call. Listen, validate feelings, normalize responses to trauma, support survivors in developing coping skills and a safety plan, and provide information about reporting and referrals.

One difference between survivors in detention and those in the community is their level of confidentiality and privacy. While the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) requires facilities to allow inmates to communicate with advocacy organizations in as confidential a manner as possible, you should assume that their calls will

be monitored or recorded — unless your organization has an agreement with the facility that guarantees confidentiality.¹ It is good practice to remind survivors that calls may be monitored and recorded by facility staff. Remember that most incarcerated survivors will be calling from shared phones, which are usually located in busy common areas. There may be a lot of background noise and little privacy.

Something else to keep in mind is that many prison phone systems have time limits for inmate calls — usually 15 minutes — and your call will be cut off when the limit is reached. You can discuss this with the facility's staff and ask if they can remove the time limit, but the caller may still be rushed by other people waiting for the phone. Keep track of the time and give the caller a five minute warning, making arrangements for a follow-up call if needed.

Responding to Letters

Providing emotional support via letters may be new to you, and may feel a little awkward at first. For incarcerated survivors,

though, writing letters can be the most private and direct way to share their experiences and feelings. Your letters, in turn, can be a source of strength and comfort to survivors in times of crisis, when they can't call a hotline.

“There was something really powerful and tangible about getting a letter. Being able to write back was an opportunity to be very thoughtful, in a way that I couldn't have been on the phone.”

— Jessica Serrano Seipel, advocate

You can say the same things in a letter that you would on a call. Use simple language to validate feelings, normalize common reactions to trauma, and provide information and referrals. You can also send brochures or articles about the healing process, or other materials you might share with survivors you meet in person, such as exercises aimed at coping or relaxation. Remember that incarcerated survivors may have complex needs, and may ask for things that are outside the scope of your services. Just as you would on a hotline call, be clear about what you can and can't provide.

Follow the same confidentiality guidelines that you would with any other survivor communication. Never forward a letter to corrections staff, or anyone else outside your organization, unless you have the survivor's permission to do so. Remember that letters to and from inmates will be opened and reviewed by corrections officials — unless

they are marked as legal mail. Organizations that provide legal advocacy may qualify for legal mail status. You can also discuss legal mail status with facility staff, as many prisons will permit incarcerated survivors and rape crisis centers to use legal mail when corresponding with each other.

Responding to Emails

Increasingly, detention facilities are allowing inmates to use email via tablets or kiosks. Treat emails the same as letters, keeping in mind that they are sent through and stored on a facility server — therefore, neither the inmates' nor your messages are confidential. Some facilities have a system for ensuring confidential email communication between inmates and their attorneys; you can talk with facility staff about setting up a similar system for inmates' communication with your organization.

Survivors of sexual abuse in detention know how hard it is to get private, confidential help from an outside advocate. Those who reach out to you have already decided that it's worth the risk. You may be their only source of support. By responding with the same care and compassion that you would to any other survivor, you can help incarcerated survivors find the strength and tools they need and deserve to begin the healing process. Yet for many years, these services were not available to people in detention.

Endnotes

1. National Standards To Prevent, Detect, and Respond to Prison Rape, 28 CFR 115 (Department of Justice, 2012), §§ 115.53, 115.253, 115.353, available at: www.federalregister.gov/documents/2012/06/20/2012-12427/national-standards-to-prevent-detect-and-respond-to-prison-rape

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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