

## ACTION UPDATE

OCTOBER 2022

**W**HEN JDI STAFF TALK WITH incarcerated people, our most important message is that everybody has the right to be safe. Affirming that human rights are absolute — that they don't stop at the prison gate — is powerful for people who are in U.S. detention facilities. And as my recent trip to South Africa shows, it is equally powerful for incarcerated people there.



At a women's prison outside the city of Durban, my JDI-South Africa colleagues and I spoke with dozens of people about their right to be free from sexual abuse, and how to get help if they are not. Most had never been told

about these protections, and it was clear that hearing this message from outsiders had a deep impact. At one point, two women approached my colleague Unathi to speak privately about what they had experienced — something they would never have shared with prison staff. Unathi, along with an independent monitor who had joined our visit, made a plan with the women to get them help.

Our South Africa team is ensuring that this crucial support reaches people held in prisons throughout the country. And, as we show in these pages, we're making exciting progress in this effort. There's much more to do to end prisoner rape in South Africa — and in the U.S. I'm grateful to all of you for supporting our work to affirm that every person, no matter what, deserves to be safe.

*Linda McFarlane*

Linda McFarlane  
Executive Director

## A Human Rights Milestone in South Africa

*After years of advocacy, JDI-South Africa wins an agreement to bring dramatic changes to the country's prisons*

**W**HEN VUSI WAS SENTENCED to prison, he was overcome with fear. "I felt like my world had come to an end," he said. An openly gay man, Vusi knew that South Africa's prisons were notorious for their anti-LGBTIQ violence. Not long after arriving in prison, he was forced to trade sex for protection from another prisoner. This happened again and again, right up until his release.

Sadly, there is nothing unusual about Vusi's story. As in the U.S., prisons in South Africa are rife with sexual abuse, and those on the margins of society — people living in poverty, people with disabilities, as well as people who are LGBTIQ — face the highest risk. This abuse may be common, but it is not inevitable. Vusi's horrifying ordeal was the result of many institutional failures — lack of staff training on how to prevent and respond to sexual abuse; policies that fall short of what's needed to ensure people in custody can report abuse

safely; and rampant homophobia, which is often stoked by officers.

Informed by the wisdom of survivors like Vusi, JDI-South Africa (JDI-SA) has long pushed the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) — which runs South Africa's prisons — to address sexual abuse. Finally, in July DCS signed a landmark agreement committing to work with JDI-SA to ensure the safety of the people in its custody.

Under the agreement, JDI-SA will train prison staff on sexual abuse prevention, and create stronger policies to protect people who are often targeted, such as people who are LGBTIQ. JDI-SA will also serve on an oversight committee to monitor DCS' efforts to keep people safe.

This historic agreement is a credit to the courage of survivors, the compassion of our donors, and the tireless advocacy of our South Africa team. In 2017, the team

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Thonile Nene, an independent prison monitor, and Linda McFarlane spoke with people in a South African prison about their right to be safe from sexual abuse.

# A Human Rights Milestone

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notched a victory when the *Policy to Address Sexual Abuse in DCS Facilities* — a human rights roadmap that JDI had drafted — was adopted by DCS. The policy was rolled out slowly and it was at risk of stalling out — until JDI-SA proved it could work by running ambitious, trauma-informed pilot

programs inside prisons. Indeed, the new agreement states that JDI-SA's sexual abuse prevention training will form part of the official training for all new prison staff.

One can only imagine how Vusi's experience might have differed if this agreement had

been in place when he was locked up — if there were better policies, a robust staff training program, and a system of oversight that included outside experts. But while we can't go back and change what happened to Vusi, we can ensure that it doesn't happen to anyone else ever again.

## Exciting Changes to Our Board and Survivor Council!

The JDI Board is pleased to welcome three new members: Robin Colbert, an advocate for rape survivors; Allison Flom, a writer and director; and Martin Leyva, an activist and scholar. The Board also appointed three new people to its Survivor Council: Jonas Caballero, an activist and law student; Dee

Farmer, an activist and the plaintiff in the historic *Farmer v. Brennan* Supreme Court case; and Ky Peterson, co-founder of a transgender rights organization.

We are also thrilled to announce that Dawn Davison has been elected as Board Chair. A

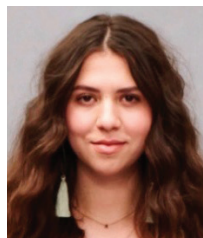
former California prison warden who helped JDI launch trauma-informed programming for incarcerated people, Dawn has served on JDI's Board since 2011. The Board also named Mateo de la Torre as Vice-Chair, Kate Summers as Treasurer, and Stephanie Walker as Survivor Council Liaison.

### New JDI Board members



**Robin  
Colbert**

"It is an honor and a pleasure to serve on JDI's Board of Directors. As an advocate for sexual assault survivors for over 10 years, I have greatly benefitted from JDI's training and resources. I look forward to reciprocating in board service."



**Allison  
Flom**

"JDI's trailblazing work has inspired me for years! I lead JDI's art workshops in two NY prisons and I'm SO honored and excited to join this Board. Incarcerated individuals' rights are human rights, and the work to protect them is urgent."



**Martin  
Leyva**

"For me, being part of JDI is about social justice, and about addressing the issues that impact the people I left behind when I was released. NO person should be harmed, in or out of prison."

### New JDI Survivor Council members



**Jonas  
Caballeros**

"The sexual abuse I experienced in prison ignited my passion to join the fight to end this violence. It was also the driving force behind my decision to study law. That's why I am excited to be part of JDI and to pass the bar in 2025!"



**Dee  
Farmer**

"My fight to end sexual violence in prison began after I sued prison officials for my rape — and won my case in the U.S. Supreme Court. I know how much JDI helps, and this is why I have joined them and support their mission."



**Ky  
Peterson**

"I'm excited to join this great team that is working hard to end sexual abuse behind bars. JDI changes lives. I felt so alone when I was abused — until I got help from JDI."

# Telling My Story of Survival — and Healing

*A new member of JDI staff — and longtime member of our Survivor Council — reflects on her journey as an advocate*

By Johanna Mills



**L**ESS THAN THREE YEARS AGO, I sat in my prison cell wondering if I would make it out safely. I am a prisoner rape survivor. I know what it's like to face retaliation from prison officials — each day filled with the fear of losing your parole date and staying in the never-ending nightmare of incarceration.

A lot has changed in the past three years. Today, I'm a Program Assistant here at Just Detention International. I recently got the chance to travel to Washington, D.C., to speak out about my experiences as a formerly incarcerated person, as part of JDI's advocacy in support of the Women in Criminal Justice Reform Act. The bill is aimed at reducing women's incarceration — and ensuring that when they are locked up, they get the care and services they need to prepare for successful reentry. The bill's sponsors, Representatives Karen Bass (D-CA) and Nancy Mace (R-SC), organized a briefing on Capitol Hill to learn from experts, including people who spent time in prison.

I was the last of several formerly incarcerated women to speak, and I listened closely as they talked about their degrading treatment

while they were locked up. Their individual experiences were different from mine, but they resonated deeply with me. I had lived through so much of what they shared — the fear, the scarcity of basic hygiene supplies, the lack of decent health care, and the stripping away of our dignity.

When it was my turn to share my story, I took a deep breath and began. I talked about the abuse I had endured as a child, and how that unresolved trauma led to addiction. I talked about being sent to a prison that did more to protect perpetrators than the people they target. I shared my terrifying experience of being retaliated against for reporting the sexual abuse I survived. And I spoke of my healing from trauma.

It's hard to know how people will respond when you share something so personal. But when I was finished, I felt empowered and supported by people who believe what I believe: that every incarcerated person, no matter their crime, has the right to be safe. Unfortunately, not everyone shares that conviction. Some of the people who don't are in charge of the safety and security of people

who are in custody. Incarcerated people are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. We have nowhere to run when an abuser is pursuing us.

JDI stepped up for me when I was sexually assaulted, never letting me forget that I was important and deserved to be protected. All the while, corrections officials did everything in their power to isolate me and destroy my sense of self-worth. I'm honored now to work with JDI and speak out on behalf of the people who are still inside, who deserve safety and dignity, and who count on us for help.

On my last evening in D.C., before heading back to Los Angeles, my colleague Julie Abbate and I walked to the edge of the Potomac River. It was getting dark, and Julie pointed out the fireflies. I had not seen one since I was a little kid! They were everywhere, slowly flying around just above the green grass and throughout the trees. What a lovely way to end my visit. Chasing fireflies, being free, and fighting for the safety of those who are still incarcerated. Such an incredible journey!

## A Historic Bill to Help Survivors

We've been busy on Capitol Hill! In September, the Senate introduced the Sexual Abuse Services in Detention Act (SASIDA), which would bring emotional support services to incarcerated survivors of sexual abuse. SASIDA is a game-changer — a bill that promises to inject badly needed resources into rape crisis centers that support incarcerated people.

Under the bill, the government would set up a grants program for community-based service providers to offer support for sexual abuse survivors behind bars. SASIDA also calls for funding to train corrections staff and to create a national resource center to build the expertise of both service providers and corrections officials on offering appropriate care to people in custody.

JDI is grateful to Senators Brian Schatz (D-HI) and John Cornyn (R-TX), who introduced SASIDA and have been stalwart allies in the effort to bring dignity and safety to people behind bars.



# Peer Education Changes Prison Culture – and Builds Leaders

**I**N 2011, WHILE INCARCERATED AT the California Institution for Women (CIW), Anitra Clark was looking for something meaningful to do with her time. She heard about a new job posting at the prison, for people who wanted to become peer educators, so she decided to give it a try.

Anitra got the job, and became one of the very first sexual abuse prevention peer educators in JDI's new program aimed at making sure that incarcerated people know they have the right to be safe from sexual abuse — and what to do if they are not. Anitra and her colleagues held workshops for thousands of their peers, facilitating honest conversations about sexual abuse behind bars and how survivors of abuse can get help.

Thanks to educators like Anitra, the people in custody at CIW started feeling safe coming forward — and abusive staff could no longer act with impunity. “It stopped a lot of things that were going on,” explained Anitra. “The environment inside the prison changed completely.”

Prior to her release in 2021, Anitra helped bring on board a team of new educators. After a brief hiatus due to the pandemic, peer education is back — and it's as strong

as ever. Many of the current peer educators were mentored by Anitra, or by people who learned from her.

“Peer education is part of the fabric of CIW,” said Vanessa Sapien, JDI's Mental Health Program Director who manages the program. “Peer educators like Anitra created openings for conversations among incarcerated people about human rights and individual dignity, and what it means to live in a community where those principles are respected.”

One of the new educators is a woman named Arlecia. When she talks about the program, you hear the wisdom of her predecessors, like Anitra. “The program has been rewarding,” she said. “I am able to be an ear, supporter, and confidant to someone who may be afraid to speak out.” Arlecia also started to believe in herself. “It strengthened me as a person. I have gained knowledge, and a way of being in service while still inside,” she said.

These benefits carry over after a person's release. “I'm a leader, and I know I have worth,” said Anitra, who today works in a supportive housing center. “I am applying myself in ways that I didn't know was possible. JDI, and the peer education program, helped me become that person.”



Anitra Clark (right), who helped pioneer JDI's peer education program, with JDI Board Chair Dawn Davison (center) and prisoners' rights advocate Robbie Hall.

## Our Victory!

**W**HEN WE LEARNED THE federal government was paying a private company to scan — and then destroy — incarcerated people's mail, we had to back fight. Prison mail was simply too important to people on the inside — a vital connection to their loved ones back home.

We knew we couldn't reverse the government's devastating mail program, known as MailGuard, without your help. So we asked you to step up, and nearly 3,000 of you signed our letter to the Attorney General opposing MailGuard. The letter worked. MailGuard is no longer in place in the federal prison system. That means that Smart Communications — the company that runs MailGuard — isn't profiting anymore off of the pain and isolation of people in the custody of the federal government.

There's far more work to do to protect prison mail. We're fighting privatized mail services that are spreading across state prisons and local jails. But this win against MailGuard — our win — is worth celebrating.

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