

ACTION UPDATE

APRIL 2023

THE LATE TOM CAHILL, my dear friend and the former President of JDI, had many exceptional qualities, but one that stood out was his sense of justice. A survivor himself, Tom understood all too well that many people did not care about prisoner rape — especially those with the power to actually stop it. But he was determined to help build a movement of people who could draw attention to this crisis and make prisons and jails safer. The movement that he built, along with Stephen Donaldson and other survivors, became JDI.



Tom's most impressive achievement came in 2003, with the passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) — a groundbreaking federal law to address the rampant sexual abuse behind bars. This year marks PREA's 20th anniversary, and in the coming months we'll be celebrating this historic occasion and the people like Tom who made it possible.

In preparing our strategic plan — JDI's five-year blueprint, which is excerpted in these pages — I was reminded of the profound impact of Tom's legacy. The plan is grounded in human rights, survivor-centered, and full of hope — all values that Tom helped instill in our movement.

Tom passed away in 2021, at age 84. He was still involved with JDI, as a member of our Survivor Council. We miss his friendship and leadership. Our 2022-2027 Strategic Plan is dedicated to his memory.

Linda McFarlane

Linda McFarlane
Executive Director

Restoring Youth

*Through New Project in Youth Detention Facilities,
JDI Focuses on Racial Equity*

TROY ISAAC FELT UNSAFE from the moment he arrived at juvenile hall. He was just 12, and other, much older boys subjected him to relentless harassment. Then the harassment escalated to sexual assault — all while staff looked the other way.

This wasn't the first time Troy was failed by the system. A Black boy in a mostly white neighborhood, he was sent to a detention facility for simple misbehavior — normal childhood conduct that went unnoticed when white kids did it. Troy was also gender non-conforming, which made him a target and heightened his sense of isolation. "There was no one I felt I could identify with," he said. "You were thought to be different, and that was that."

For years, kids in detention like Troy have not been getting support that is culturally sensitive and tailored to their needs. But a new JDI project called Restoring Youth aims to fundamentally shift how facility staff and outside service providers work with

children in custody. Funded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Restoring Youth will expand trauma-informed services and education for youth in detention, and ensure such programs are rooted in racial equity and accessible to young people from traditionally underserved communities.

"So many kids in custody have experienced multiple forms of trauma and abuse prior to their detention, in addition to the trauma of systemic oppression," said Cynthia Totten, a JDI Deputy Executive Director who is heading up the project. "Their lives have been shaped by anti-Black racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, among other factors. We have to provide support that takes all of their experiences into account. Through Restoring Youth, we are helping detention staff and service providers to see kids for who they are and where they come from, which shapes the kind of support these kids need."

Our key partner on Restoring Youth is the Love More Movement, a grassroots

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Youth detention facilities — like the Texas juvenile center seen above — are overwhelmingly made up of children of color. A new JDI project puts racial equity at the center of our programs for kids in custody.

Coming Together to Share Hope

Supporters like you sent more than 28,000 Words of Hope messages, bringing warmth and kindness to survivors behind bars

PRISON LIFE IS, BY DEFINITION, isolating. Incarcerated people are removed from their families and loved ones, and all of the familiar comforts of home. This loss of connection can be especially difficult during the holidays — and that's why JDI runs *Words of Hope*, an annual campaign to send greeting cards to incarcerated survivors.

Each card contains a hand-written message — expressions of compassion and good cheer to help carry people through a dark time. This year, people like you helped send more than 28,000 cards to people in prisons, jails, and for the first time ever, a youth facility. Every greeting made a difference — just ask Michael. He told us, “I loved the cards. They picked me up. They were the only ones I got this year.”

Scores of other survivors wrote to us to thank you — the caring people who took the time to write a thoughtful message. “I’m returning well wishes and words of encouragement to you all,” said Ernest. “The cards have been added to a Christmas tree I made of cards from *Words of Hope*. They are all beautiful and encouraging.” LaVelle, a survivor in Mississippi, was also deeply moved by your act of kindness. He wanted you to know, “I received all of the wonderful cards JDI and friends consistently send each year, and each time I get them, I am overjoyed.” Christopher, a sur-

vivor in Texas, said, “Thank you for the lovely Christmas cards. I love them so very much. I cannot thank you enough for the light you bring to my dark world.”

A common sentiment many of you shared in the cards was one of solidarity — of letting incarcerated survivors know that they are not alone or forgotten. This year’s *Words of Hope* card featured a painting by Johanna Mills, a JDI Program Associate and Survivor Council member. Fittingly, the painting’s title is, “You Are Not Alone.”

Hundreds of you wrote cards — including at events organized for school children, university students, law offices, advocacy organizations, and more. A group of Penn Law students contributed hundreds of beautiful cards for survivors. “We wanted to let survivors know that we are here and thinking of them,” said Audrey Adams, one of the students. “Writing cards for *Words of Hope* allowed us to send our best wishes, as well as engage with the larger Penn Law community to spread awareness about sexual abuse in detention. We were heartened to see so many of our classmates participating in the *Words of Hope* campaign and eager to learn more.”

The messages were sent from every corner of the US, as well as from Canada, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Thank you for helping us spread hope!



Thanks to you, incarcerated people received warm, colorful Words of Hope cards — like these greetings from Jennifer, a supporter in Pennsylvania

Restoring Youth

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advocacy organization that is focused on trauma and healing in Black and brown communities. The organization’s expertise is in creating culturally responsive crisis services, especially for those who do not typically seek such support.

Addressing the root of trauma — both the acute trauma of sexual abuse and the collective trauma of racism — is a core part of the Love More Movement’s approach. “In our society, it’s second nature to address harm with more harm,” says Richard Smith, a consultant with the Love More Movement who is playing a leading role in the project. “What we’re doing is developing a model that is healing-centered and restorative.”

A survivor of childhood sexual abuse who was incarcerated at 16, Richard knows how focusing on racial equity can have a dramatic impact on a person’s healing. “When you look around and everyone in prison is Black like you, you think ‘something must be wrong with us,’” he said. “It was important for me and is important for kids of color to shift from a mindset of what’s wrong with you to what happened to you.”

Since launching the project in January, JDI and the Love More Movement — supported by our partners at Valor, the California sexual assault coalition — have focused on helping local rape crisis centers provide culturally specific services to young people in facilities in California and Ohio — states whose youth detention systems disproportionately hold children who are Latine and Black, respectively. Our goal is to ensure that the kids in these facilities get support and are treated with respect — and to show that it is possible to do so in facilities everywhere.

Restoring Youth wasn’t around when Troy was locked up. But through extraordinary courage, and with help from JDI, Troy survived. Today, as a member of our Survivor Council, he is a leader in the fight to make youth facilities safer. “Despite everything that happened to me, I still have hope,” he said. “I know that no matter what someone has been through, people can turn their lives around with a little support and love. I am proof of that.”

A Roadmap to Protect the Dignity of Incarcerated People

JDI is the only organization in the world dedicated exclusively to ending prisoner rape. Given JDI's singular role — and the magnitude of the crisis we face — it is essential that we remain tightly focused on our mission. Recently, we launched our latest strategic plan — a blueprint to guide our work for the next years. The plan's ten goals are summarized below; more details are at www.justdetention.org/strategicplan.



Artists incarcerated in South Carolina hold butterflies they created for #PrisonersToo, a JDI campaign to bring sexual abuse survivors behind bars into the #MeToo movement. The artists chose butterflies to symbolize their transformative journey of healing.

programs to ensure the safety and dignity of the people in their custody. A key area of focus will be working with rape crisis counselors to build their motivation and skills to provide culturally appropriate services to currently and formerly incarcerated survivors.

8. International Work

JDI will deepen our collaboration with our sister organization, Just Detention International-South Africa, to push for improved prison policies and oversight, promote safety for LG-BTQI+ and other people at risk for abuse, and mobilize a regional coalition to protect incarcerated people's rights in southern Africa. We will also seek to build connections with new allies serving as a hub for groups willing to address sexual abuse in detention.

9. Immigration Detention

JDI will strengthen our partnerships with organizations working to protect people in the immigration detention system and to stop the expansion of these facilities. We will also push the federal government to collect and share data on people's experiences with sexual abuse in immigration detention.

10. Resource Development

JDI will continue to grow the movement to end prisoner rape, deepening ties with existing supporters, investing in strategies to reach more people, and expanding our fundraising. We will also launch campaigns for people to take action to support incarcerated people and JDI's mission.

Our Ten Strategic Goals

1. Organizational Governance

JDI will ensure its practices advance equity and staff wellbeing. We will continue to build a diverse board, staff, and Survivor Council, especially from communities with experience in the systems we are seeking to change.

2. Culture Change

JDI will expand our efforts to promote a culture of safety inside detention facilities, including by building the leadership of incarcerated people. Through new collaborations, we will explore how restorative justice principles can inform our work.

3. Communications

JDI will serve as a leading voice for the human rights of incarcerated people. Our efforts will combat harmful pop culture myths about sexual abuse behind bars through fact-based analysis and survivor testimonies.

4. Direct Work with Survivors

JDI will provide direct services to survivors in detention through our hotline, correspondence, and in-person healing programs. We will also

pilot new trauma-informed programs and advocate for increased support services to ensure that survivors get the help they deserve.

5. Litigation Support

JDI will support legal efforts to protect the rights of incarcerated people, including by building attorneys' expertise on sexual abuse in detention; contributing to and writing amicus briefs; serving as an expert witness; sharing survivor testimony with litigators; and tracking ongoing cases.

6. Policy Advocacy and Oversight

JDI will promote safer detention policies at the federal, state, and local levels. We will advocate for meaningful implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act, including through robust data collection and stronger oversight. We will also push for increased resources for sexual abuse service providers, so that people in detention facilities nationwide can get help.

7. Expert Assistance

JDI will expand our work on the ground with corrections officials, developing innovative

We Moved!

JDI's Los Angeles headquarters have moved. Our new address is:

3250 Wilshire Blvd.,
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“I’m Glad to Be in the Light Again”

WHEN KAREN LEARNED THAT her reentry home was offering evening workshops on coping with trauma, she was skeptical — and understandably so. Karen is a trainee chef who spends hours each day in a chaotic, steam-filled kitchen. After a grueling day behind the stove, the last thing she wanted to do was talk about painful feelings. But as she came to find out, these workshops were different. Run by JDI, the sessions were designed to help people process trauma through art. Instead of talking about difficult feelings, participants could depict them through painting, drawing, or collage. “It sounds strange, but you can express your feelings better through art than with words,” explained Karen. “Some therapy programs can make you feel stifled, like you’re trying fit a square peg into a round hole. But with art, the feelings just come out.”

Karen’s reentry housing program, called Home Free, has a unique mission. Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, the home is specifically for formerly incarcerated women who are also survivors of domestic abuse. The workshops were JDI’s first-ever in a reentry facility — a recognition of the profound need for support for people returning to their communities from prison. Not only did the women at Home Free survive intimate partner violence, many also endured abuse, harassment, and deprivation in the prison system. “When you’re dealing with so many layers of trauma, there can be a tendency among advocates to push

survivors to put a name to what they’re dealing with,” said Edward Cervantes, JDI’s Senior Program Officer and co-facilitator of the workshops at Home Free. “We’re deliberate in creating a space where people can go at their own pace. There’s no judgement, no pressure to label their feelings. And better yet, it’s fun.”

Some sessions focused on healing and on giving the women the tools to express — and disarm — those heavy emotions that can weigh us down. Others were about helping the women see themselves for the strong, resilient people that they are. The final workshop’s theme was “Celebrating Ourselves.” Karen’s painting, of yellow flowers, was symbolic of her journey.

“Coming out of prison I felt exposed and kind of scared dealing with the outside world,” Karen explained. “Flowers are delicate and fragile but full of beauty and life. They can easily wither and die if not watered and given the proper light. Prison was a dark place, and the world can be to. I’m glad to be in the light again.”

Karen plans on moving to Tennessee to be with family after she finishes her time at Home Free. But she isn’t going to stop creating. In fact, she took her art supplies on a recent visit to her see her grandchildren, and they made art together. “No one’s art is better than anyone else’s,” she said. “Art is just art, and that’s what’s so cool about it.”



Karen’s painting of yellow flowers are symbolic of her journey. “Flowers are delicate and fragile but full of beauty and life,” she explained.

Protecting Mail at Rikers

LAST YEAR, NEW YORK CITY JAIL officials put forward a plan to block mail on Rikers Island. Under the proposal, all incoming letters would be digitized by a private company and made available only on a proprietary tablet.

JDI has been fighting these devastating mail restrictions and, with your support, we helped end the federal government’s use of a privately run mail digitization service. We certainly weren’t going to sit by and let mail digitization proceed at Rikers. On the day the plan was to be voted on by the city’s jail oversight board, JDI’s Executive Director Linda McFarlane published an op-ed in the New York Daily News calling for the plan to be blocked.

In a surprise move, the board declined to vote on the mail digitization plan, stopping it in its tracks. This is a major win for incarcerated people and their families. It’s also one battle in a larger fight to protect prison mail. And we aren’t going to quit, because the mail is simply too important to be privatized.

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