

JUST DETENTION INTERNATIONAL



ACTION UPDATE

SPRING 2024

SURVIVORS SET THE AGENDA

With survivors leading the way, JDI and our allies are shaping the future of the fight to protect incarcerated people. In November, members of our staff, board, and Survivor Council joined advocates, corrections officials, and policymakers in Washington, D.C., for a convening tied to the Prison Rape Elimination Act's 20th anniversary. Organized by the National PREA Resource Center and the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, the event featured a series of high-level discussions on where we are now in the work to end prisoner rape — and where we go from here. Our team shared insights on a range of topics: everything from culturally sensitive practices in tribal detention facilities to survivor-centered statistical research. "This is why we do the work that we do," said Johanna Mills, a JDI Program Associate and Survivor Council member who spoke on a panel. "The event is proof that when advocates and survivors have a seat at the table, it can make a real difference." For more information, visit: www.prearesourcecenter.org/about/20th-anniversary-of-prea



JDI Survivor Council member Robbie Hall (standing, fifth from right) with staff representing the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, JDI, Justice First, Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition, and Survived & Punished in front of the California Institution for Women.

OUR VOICES MATTER

Through a survivor-led initiative, people in California's women's prisons are creating change

On a chilly morning in November, roughly 100 people filled the auditorium at the California Institution for Women (CIW). They were there to speak with JDI and other advocates about sexual abuse — what incarcerated people are seeing and experiencing at CIW, and what they need to feel safe.

The gathering was part of a historic series of town halls at CIW and the state's only other women's prison, the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF). The town halls were set up by a coalition of advocates — led by Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition (SWFC) — that had been tasked by the California state legislature with gathering recommendations on addressing sexual abuse in women's prisons. We took steps to make incarcerated

people feel comfortable speaking out — including by securing an agreement that no prison staff would be present — but it can be hard to open up about trauma. Especially in the very setting where that trauma occurred.

That's where Robbie Hall came in. A JDI Survivor Council member and activist, Robbie helped lead small group discussions that followed the town hall at CIW. Robbie is smart, kind, and an active listener — the kind

"Talking to an advocate is what helped me to open up."

ROBBIE HALL, JDI SURVIVOR COUNCIL MEMBER AND ACTIVIST

of person whose presence puts people at ease. She also is deeply familiar with CIW and well known to the community, having spent more than 35 years incarcerated there. "It's scary in there, and you don't know who to trust," she explained.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

CALLING ALL ARTISTS BEHIND BARS!

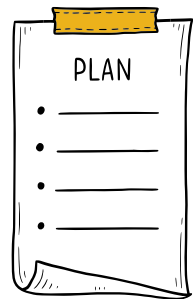
We would like to feature art created by an incarcerated artist on our 2024 Words of Hope greeting card. If you would like your piece to be considered, please mail it to Leelyn Aquino at 3250 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1630, Los Angeles, CA 90010. (Every piece will returned to the artist.)

"When advocates and survivors have a seat at the table, it can make a real difference."

JOHANNA MILLS, JDI PROGRAM ASSOCIATE AND SURVIVOR COUNCIL MEMBER

THE POWER OF YOUR WORDS

Your words made a difference! Over the holidays, many of you wrote compassionate Words of Hope messages to incarcerated survivors. These warm greetings were a lifeline for survivors, bringing joy to people who often feel isolated and forgotten. Altogether, people like you wrote more than 31,000 holiday greetings — an outpouring of kindness that shows your compassion for people in detention. These heartfelt greetings were a special gift to survivors like Joshua. "Y'all are very wonderful blessings to my life," he wrote. "The unforgettable care and support is amazing, and it put a smile on my face."



Drawing from the town hall discussions, JDI and its allies crafted a bold set of recommendations to improve conditions inside California's women's prisons.

CONTINUED FROM COVER

At the CIW town hall, Robbie became a trusted confidante for the incarcerated community. She began each conversation with a reassurance that no one's identity would be revealed to prison staff— an important guarantee given the very real risk of retaliation for speaking out. "It gives you hope when you have someone from the outside listening to you," she said. "When I was incarcerated, talking to an advocate is

what helped me to open up, because I was scared to speak with staff. It helped me understand that my voice mattered. That all of our voices matter."

Thanks to their trust in Robbie and other formerly incarcerated advocates, people at CIW began to open up about their experiences. They shared about the sexual harassment and abuse they endure on a daily basis, and how the current measures designed to protect them aren't working.

One particular area of concern was around reporting. People living at both CIW and CCWF explained that their formal grievances were ignored or, even worse, shared with the very people who had abused them.

A SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH

Robbie was one of many formerly incarcerated people who attended the town halls.

Indeed, the California legislature specifically calls for formerly incarcerated people to play a role in this project, and the coalition that formed in response is made up of organizations that, like JDI and SWFC, place incarcerated people and survivors at the heart of their advocacy, including California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Justice First, Survived & Punished, and VALOR. The coalition committed to bringing in as many voices as possible to the town halls. If people couldn't attend, or didn't feel comfortable doing so, they were invited to share their thoughts confidentially by letter.

During our trips to CIW and CCWF, advocates visited segregated housing units in addition to those holding the general population — again without being accompanied by prison staff. "Advocates rarely have this much access," said Edward Cervantes, a JDI Program Officer who was part of the delegation. "We wanted our final recommendations to be truly inclusive, and for that to happen we needed to reach people who normally don't have a voice."

The coalition's report was submitted to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and is currently with the state legislature. The report's recommendations are bold, and cover a broad spectrum of issues that affect the lives of the people in California's women's prisons. If implemented, these measures will dramatically improve the safety of these facilities.

While the recommendations are an important step, Robbie knows the work isn't over. "I won't stop. I believe in pressing. I believe in fighting for what's right," she said. "There's going to be a breakthrough. We are going to take baby steps toward it, but I know it will happen." ■



MAKING CALIFORNIA'S PRISONS SAFER

ABOVE LEFT: JDI Mental Health Program Director Vanessa Sapien (left) and JDI Survivor Council member Robbie Hall; ABOVE RIGHT: A mural at the Central California Women's Facility; RIGHT: The yard at the California Institution for Women.

SURVIVOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Why I Fight for Survivors

I first heard about JDI eight years ago, when I was incarcerated in Georgia. Linda McFarlane, JDI's Executive Director, was at the prison to speak with people about how we were being treated by staff and whether or not we felt safe.

When I met her, I could tell right away that this was a person who actually cared and wanted to help.

Linda and I talked about life in the prison, and specifically the harassment and barriers to medical care and services I was facing because of being a trans man. I told her about an incident with an

officer that had happened literally on my way to speak with her. I don't know what exactly she said or did after we spoke, but when that officer came around later, he apologized. I never had a problem with him again.

Every incarcerated survivor needs someone like Linda — someone who will listen to them and fight for them. I wanted to be that person for others, and while I was still incarcerated, I dreamed of starting my own organization. With the help of my friend Pinky Shear, that dream became a reality when we launched Freedom Overground in 2016.

Freedom Overground helps incarcerated people get vital information about their safety —

like how to file a grievance and how to request hormone replacement therapy. We also send care packages and purchase phone minutes and stamps for incarcerated people. If a client is being mistreated, we will advocate on their behalf. We continue to support people once they are released, providing them with a backpack full of essentials: a prepaid phone, a pair of work boots, a prepaid debit card, a Walmart gift card, a water bottle, and a notebook of resources.

When Linda came to my prison all those years ago, she listened to me, supported me, and spoke up on my behalf. That's what advocacy looks like. Today, I am so proud to be able to be doing this work too — as a

co-founder of Freedom Overground and a member of the JDI Survivor Council. The fight to support incarcerated survivors and make detention facilities safer isn't easy. But with groups like JDI and Freedom Overground working together, I know we can do it.



MEET KY PETERSON

Ky is a member of the JDI Survivor Council and the co-founder Freedom Overground, which supports currently and formerly incarcerated transgender people.



NOTES FROM THE FIELD



An Opportunity for Stillness

Mindfulness workshops offer participants moments of silence amid the chaos of prison

Prisons are loud, unpredictable, and stressful places. JDI's Mindfulness Inside program at the California Rehabilitation Center (CRC) helps participants cope with that chaos. Structured around meditation and group discussion, the program teaches participants the physical and mental health benefits of paying close attention to their bodies and minds — and especially their breath. Over the course of eight weeks, the groups

practice guided meditations, scanning their bodies for pain or tension, and mindful movements based on the practice of Qigong. The workshops are also an opportunity for participants to recognize the skills they've developed on their own to process and overcome the challenges of being incarcerated — and to share that wisdom with one another. Edward Cervantes, a Senior Program Officer at JDI, talked about his experience running these workshops.

Facilitating these workshops made me realize just how much we on the outside take silence for granted. For incarcerated people, moments of quiet and stillness are almost nonexistent. There was one participant in the workshops who told me that his dorm was so loud that he often sleeps with his head next to his television with the volume turned all the way up, to create a kind of white noise. With our mindfulness workshops, people have an opportunity to experience a bit of stillness. There are moments in the workshops that sometimes feel like magic. It's like we all take a collective sigh of relief. People can let their guards down a little and connect with us and with the mindfulness concepts.



JDI Senior Program Officer Edward Cervantes co-runs mindfulness workshops at CRC

"Both Edward and Vanessa [JDI's Mental Health Program Director] really care. It's a nice feeling. We get dehumanized on a daily basis by the majority of the corrections officers, so feeling connection [with other participants] was good."

JOSHUA, A MINDFULNESS WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT AT CRC

"This program gave us a safe, welcoming and peaceful place that allowed us to come to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. It has helped me reach a new state of mindfulness and understanding."

CADEN, A MINDFULNESS WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT AT CRC



By Linda McFarlane

The Honor of a Lifetime

In December, JDI was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for the third straight year. It's deeply humbling to be put forward for such a prestigious honor. Past recipients include legendary human rights activists — many of whom are my heroes, and yours too, I bet.

The incarcerated survivors central to our movement aren't household names. Indeed, many literally cannot share their real names, because to do so would put them at risk. One survi-

vor who wrote JDI recently — and who asked that we refer to him as Lee — typifies the courage of incarcerated people. Lee reached out for support after he was sexually assaulted in a state prison, and we sent him resources to help him cope with trauma. But he also wants to join the fight, to ensure that what he endured doesn't happen to anyone else. "I love helping others, and I want to display the change I would like to see," he wrote.

Survivors like Lee are the backbone of our movement — and we couldn't be here for Lee without people like you. If we do win the Nobel Peace Prize, it will be because survivors had the courage to speak out. And it will also be thanks to people like you, whose support for our work helps survivors find their voice.

I hope that all of you, who are in this movement with us, are proud of this nomination. And if JDI wins, the honor belongs to all of us.

RAPE IS NOT PART OF THE PENALTY

Just Detention International is a health and human rights organization that seeks to end sexual abuse in all forms of detention.

Rape is Not Part of the Penalty



ACTION UPDATE // SPRING 2024

IN THIS ISSUE

- Survivors Advocate for Safer Prisons in California
- The Impact of Your Holiday Greetings
- "Why I Fight For Survivors"
- JDI's Mindfulness Program Behind Bars

WE ARE HERE TO HELP

All survivors of sexual abuse deserve support and compassion. JDI's online Resource Guide lists service providers in all 50 states that can help incarcerated survivors. **To view the Resource Guide, visit www.justdetention.org/resources/survivor-resources/find-local-services**

Sexual abuse behind bars is absolutely preventable. You can help end it.

JUSTDETENTION.ORG/DONATE

Scan this QR code to donate today!



CONTACT US

WEB www.justdetention.org
EMAIL info@justdetention.org

HEADQUARTERS

3250 Wilshire Blvd,
Suite 1630
Los Angeles, CA 90010
T (213) 384-1400

EAST COAST

1100 H St, NW
Suite 400
Washington DC, 20005
T (202) 506-3333

SOUTH AFRICA

Norwood Place, 2nd Floor
66 Grant Avenue
Northwood, Johannesburg, 2192
South Africa
T +27 (11) 483 0989

Feeling Safe, and at Home

Odwa Mbona knows as well as anyone how police can use their power to abuse transgender sex workers. A trans rights activist and JDI-South Africa Survivor Council member, Odwa has been arrested several times by cops who, in return for her release, demanded a bribe or sexual favor. So when the JDI-SA team asked Odwa to help organize supportive art workshops and focus groups

for transgender women, most of whom were sex workers, she leapt at the opportunity.

JDI-SA's goal for the focus groups was to provide a judgment-free space for transgender women to talk about the ways that police target them for abuse. Odwa's presence in particular made the participants feel safe to share their stories and express their emotions. "It is hard to share with people who have not been in our situation," she explained. "But just being with trans

women, and talking about the struggles, is its own form of relief."

The art workshops that followed offered another form of relief. Participants had the time and space to explore their feelings through art. Many credited Odwa and JDI-SA staff for helping them tap into their creative side. As one participant said, "They created an atmosphere that was conducive for us to feel safe and to feel at home."



NELISWE NKOSI

At a JDI-SA workshop, transgender women create art to process difficult feelings