

GUIDE TO ANSWERING HOTLINE CALLS FROM INCARCERATED SURVIVORS

Guide to Answering Hotline Calls from Incarcerated Survivors

Like survivors in the outside community, incarcerated survivors use hotlines for emotional support, information, and hope. This guide provides tips and tools for how to respond to calls from incarcerated survivors, covering a range of concerns that callers may raise. This guide is intended for advocates who have received agency-required rape crisis advocacy training, as well as some training on working with incarcerated survivors.

For a comprehensive overview on operating a hotline for incarcerated survivors, please see JDI's publication *An Advocate's Guide to An Inside Line, Just Detention International's Emotional Support Line (An Advocate's Guide)*. For more information and tools on working with survivors of sexual abuse in detention, please visit JDI's Service Providers Resources page at <https://justdetention.org/resources/service-providers-resources/service-provider-resources/>.

A note about language: as part of an anti-oppression approach to ending sexual violence, JDI strongly recommends using people-centered language, such "incarcerated people" or "people in detention." Incarcerated people should not be defined by their incarceration status or the crime they may have committed.

Before Taking Calls from Incarcerated Survivors

Before responding to calls from survivors of sexual abuse in detention, you should receive training on providing victim services for incarcerated survivors. With some introductory training, you will find that you are able to adapt many of the approaches you use to help survivors in the outside community to working with incarcerated callers.

Additionally, you should:

- **Familiarize yourself with the layout of the facility(ies) your program takes calls from, and be prepared for the obstacles that the detention setting presents for callers.** In particular, know whether the phones people in custody use to call your hotline are in areas where it might be difficult to maintain privacy. Many detention facilities place a 15 or 20-minute time limit on phone calls. Incarcerated people may have inconsistent access to the phones in general, especially during facility lockdowns. These barriers to open communication limit what can be accomplished on a hotline call and how much survivors are able to share. This can challenge advocates' ability to listen attentively and provide support in the way you typically would on a call.
- **Be prepared to share relevant information that can empower callers in their decision-making process and healing,** just as you would when providing support services for survivors in the broader community. Specifically, learn how survivors incarcerated at the facility(ies) you are working with can make a report of sexual abuse and/or sexual harassment and follow up on an investigation into their report. Additionally, know how to refer callers for facility medical and mental

health services, and have information on the types of programming available at the confinement facility.

- **Keep in mind that mental health care often looks different inside detention facilities** and does not mirror the services that may be available in the community. If you refer someone to mental health or medical, know that the level of care provided may be minimal, with limited meaningful services provided for those who are not experiencing life threatening emergencies or are not diagnosed with severe mental health issues and illnesses.

Answering Hotline Calls

Quick Reference: The Arc of a Hotline Call

You will find that most calls will not follow the same path, but this can be a helpful framing to have in mind as you begin to respond to calls from incarcerated survivors.

- Establish rapport. Explain the purpose of the line and confidentiality.
- Establish safety. Are there safety concerns that need to be addressed before proceeding with the call? (Is the caller being watched or harassed while on the call? Is their life being threatened? Does what is being shared fall within your mandates to report?)
- Explore the problem. What is the salient issue the caller is experiencing? Listen, validate, and offer support.
- Problem-solve. Discuss self-care options and coping skills.

Remember that there are also some key steps to take after ending a hotline call. For guidance on advocacy you might conduct — e.g., documenting calls and other follow-up actions such as written correspondence — please refer to *An Advocate's Guide*.

General Guidelines for Responding to Calls from Incarcerated Survivors

Here are some general guidelines for advocates responding to hotline calls from incarcerated survivors:

- **Believe survivors.** You may be the first person they speak to about their abuse whose sole intention and responsibility is to support them and create a safe space.
- **Offer a safe and judgement-free space.** Calls to your program's hotline should be unmonitored and unrecorded, whereas most other types of calls in detention are not. Be sure to emphasize this with callers and explain limits to confidentiality, if appropriate.
- **Provide options and choices that are within the survivor's control,** however small they may seem (grounding and coping skills, self-care tips, and safety planning options that are more appropriate in detention settings). It can be helpful to talk with the survivor about what is workable.
- **Normalize and validate the survivor's experiences.** No matter what crime a person may have committed, rape is never a part of the penalty. No one deserves to be abused simply because they are incarcerated.

- **Let the survivor lead, and take everything at their pace.** Incarcerated callers will often want to discuss issues around conditions of confinement that seem unrelated to abuse. This typically happens for safety reasons and lack of privacy. There are many distractions in detention and safety concerns to which advocates are not privy. Allowing space to understand the environment is crucial.
- **Use a trauma-informed lens,** as you would with any survivor. When working with survivors in detention, trauma-informed care includes understanding the culture and context of incarceration from which calls are coming. By helping callers navigate traumas that cause emotional crisis, advocates can give survivors the tools they can then apply to their healing.
- **Respect a survivor's autonomy.** This is especially critical in detention, as it allows the survivor to regain a sense of control in an environment that otherwise does not allow for autonomy.
- **Keep in mind that each call and each caller has individual needs;** try to meet survivors where they are. Note that it can take time for survivors in detention to build trust, and it can take several calls for them to feel safe opening up to you and other advocates in your program.
- **Offer relevant resources,** if available. When making referrals, such as to a facility's mental health staff or to other community organizations, verify in advance that the entity has the capacity to respond with support that is reasonably likely to meet the survivor's needs.

Confidentiality and Advocates' Ethical Responsibilities

Advocates should continue to practice the confidentiality requirements established by their state and their agency when working with incarcerated survivors. A survivor's right to confidentiality does not change depending on where the survivor lives, nor do advocates' legal and ethical obligations.

Before establishing services with a corrections facility, your agency should have a formal agreement in place that discusses confidentiality, specifically the monitoring and recording of calls. If confidentiality has not been agreed upon, or advocates are unsure of whether calls are monitored, they should notify callers at the beginning of each call that the call might not be confidential.

Additionally, advocates should be trained on when it may be appropriate (or required) to break confidentiality, such as when a caller has a plan to harm themselves or others. Based on what the program has agreed upon with the facility, advocates should know the appropriate steps to take.

Self-Care for Callers

A crucial part of healing is practicing good self-care. It is important to recognize that the self-care strategies and coping skills that are available to you are not always available to people in detention. You should work with the survivor to identify what is realistic for them. Survivors are often already practicing self-soothing and self-care activities. A great question to ask is what the survivor already does when they are feeling stressed/upset. You can also ask what activities they do that help them feel calm or take their mind off of things. This will help you get a sense of what already works best for them and

what they have access to while incarcerated. If the survivor is having trouble identifying activities to practice, think about self-care and coping skills that are universal, such as positive self-talk or meditation.

Safety Planning in Detention

Incarcerated survivors face the same devastating physical and emotional trauma as any other survivor but, in many cases, the threats to their safety inside confinement facilities may be more serious. Unfortunately, it can be common for survivors of sexual abuse to be threatened or retaliated against by other incarcerated people or staff for reporting abuse. For many, it is impossible to avoid ongoing contact with the perpetrator. When survivors feel they are in danger, it may be best to create a safety plan with them. There is a great deal of overlap between the best practices for developing a safety plan in detention and developing one in the community.

The key steps are to work with the survivor to:

- First, **assess the threats to the survivor's safety** and identify whether the threat is from other incarcerated people, staff, or both.
- Next, advocates should **review any action the survivor may have already taken to stay safe.**
- When survivors do not feel safe reporting, advocates can **help them create a list of the places — and the people** (e.g., staff members, teachers, volunteers, clergy) **— in the facility who make them feel safe.** Encourage them to think of at least one person during each shift of the day. Advocates should also ask callers about other incarcerated people

who are friends, whose presence alone can often provide support and comfort. In addition, reaching out to family or other support systems in the community can be helpful.

- Advocates should also **help survivors develop an emergency plan**. Survivors should have emergency contacts and support line numbers to call in the event of a crisis.
- Advocates should **discuss with callers what to do in a crisis situation**, reviewing options such as an intercom system, an alarm button, and simply shouting for help.
- Lastly, advocates should **encourage callers to call back to check in within 24 hours, or as needed**, as part of their safety plan. Advocates should alert the team when callers are expected to call back for safety check-ins.

It is important to remember that a survivor's opinion regarding his or her safety is the one that matters the most. This principle is as true for incarcerated survivors as it is for survivors in the community, and it holds in spite of the effect that crises can have on decision-making. Keeping this in mind, advocates should work with survivors to brainstorm options, respect the choices they make, and, with permission, advocate on their behalf.

Dos, Don'ts and Common Scenarios

We detail some scenarios related to your role as an advocate and maintaining appropriate boundaries below. But first, here are some general Dos and Don'ts around responding to calls from incarcerated survivors.

Things NOT to do as an Advocate	Things to DO as an Advocate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make promises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help connect survivors to resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give information and explain the process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalize survivors' responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell survivors what to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen and provide emotional support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break confidentiality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower survivors

Common Scenarios: Tips and Strategies for Engaging Specific Caller Situations

When someone only wants to report a sexual abuse and believes this is a reporting line:

- Inform callers of their reporting options.
- Explain the purpose of this line, and remind callers you do not work for the DOC.
- Help talk them through the reporting process and what they might want to say.
- Encourage the survivor to call back after making a report, in order to process the steps they took.

Managing Frequent Callers

- Limit frequent callers to ONE call a day unless they are in immediate crisis. Longer sessions move beyond crisis intervention or basic support. Advocates are not therapists. It is fine to explain this to callers.
- When someone who is a survivor calls every day, just to check in, take the call. Remember that the prison environment can often be extremely re-traumatizing for survivors, and they may use the line regularly to help them cope. This is totally within the scope and purpose of the line.
- Clarify the purpose of the support line. Explain that you provide crisis intervention, support, information, and referrals for survivors of sexual abuse and sexual harassment, or for people who are concerned about someone else who has been sexually abused.
- Clarify that when you limit calls, it is not because the survivor has done something wrong.

Off-Topic Calls

General Tips:

- People who are currently incarcerated are often dealing with many issues — including mental health concerns, drug/alcohol problems, family and economic stressors, their criminal case — and often have very few resources. As a result, people will call for help that is not directly related to sexual abuse. Keep in mind that although these callers may seem like a nuisance, they may not have any other way of getting the help they need. Also, survivors of sexual abuse may “test

out” a support line by asking for help with an issue that is easier to talk about than sexual abuse.

- Steer the call back to what you can provide — crisis intervention, support, information, and referrals about healing from sexual assault or harassment (not legal advice or case management). Suggest other resources and referrals, when possible.

Language to use:

- “This line is for people who have been sexually abused or harassed, or their loved ones. It doesn’t sound like that’s why you are calling. I need to keep it open for survivors of abuse, so I am going to go now.”
- “It sounds like what you are looking for is not what we do. You can feel free to call back if you need to talk about sexual abuse or sexual harassment, but I am going to have to end the call now.”
- “I understand you need help with [whatever the person’s concern is]. I’m sorry, but that’s not what we do. This line is for survivors of sexual abuse, so I am going to hang up now. Feel free to call back if your needs change.”

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