

OVW Special Population Webinar Series Discussion Guide

Vulnerable and Underserved: Victim Advocacy for Incarcerated Survivors with Mental Illness

"I was in the Residential Treatment Program, where the officer was sexually harassing me and then sexually abused me. I started cutting on myself because I was so upset. Now I have the hotline and someone who cares to talk to. I don't cut anymore."- Ralph, an incarcerated male survivor with mental illness

Introduction

Vulnerable and Underserved: Victim Advocacy for Incarcerated Survivors with Mental Illness is a webinar that will help advocates who are working behind bars. It explores strategies for helping one of the most vulnerable groups in detention: people who have mental illness. This is a segment of the U.S. prison population that has grown exponentially in recent decades. As the webinar discusses, people who suffer from mental illness face staggeringly high rates of incarceration — and only a small fraction receive treatment behind bars. Worse still, corrections officials often fail to ensure the safety of people with mental illness who are in their care. This webinar will look at the vulnerability of prisoners with mental illness and the challenges that they face in accessing trauma-informed assistance. Additionally, presenters will highlight how to use the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards as a tool to advocate for prisoners with mental illness. A licensed clinical psychologist with expertise in jail and juvenile detention systems will provide practical guidance on how to serve incarcerated survivors with mental illness, including managing confidentiality and obtaining clinical support from the facility's mental health staff. The webinar is part of a series on providing victim services for especially underserved incarcerated populations, including Deaf and hard of hearing survivors, survivors with disabilities, survivors of sexual abuse perpetrated by women, and LGBTI survivors.

Discussion Questions

1. Has your agency provided victim services for survivors who have mental illness? What about incarcerated or formerly incarcerated survivors with mental illness?
2. Please complete the following query:

Our staff is culturally competent to address the needs and concerns, including safety, of incarcerated survivors with mental illness.

Strongly
Disagree



Disagree



Somewhat
Agree



Agree



Strongly
Agree



3. If you responded *strongly disagree*, *disagree* or *somewhat agree* to any of the above questions, discuss with your organizational leadership the gaps in your agency's readiness to provide culturally sensitive services to incarcerated survivors with mental illness.
4. What steps can your organization take to ensure services for survivors with mental illness are culturally sensitive? Here are some tips to build cultural competence:
 - Provide (additional) staff training on working with survivors with mental illness and on the protections for prisoners with mental illness under the PREA standards
 - Create space for staff to openly discuss concerns around serving incarcerated survivors with mental illness
 - Build internal competency by recruiting staff, board, and volunteers who are committed to providing services and achieving justice for survivors with mental illness
 - Get to know the mental health staff at each facility where your organization provides services, and learn about their specific roles
 - Identify and build relationships with mental health service agencies and advocacy organizations in your community; request training and technical assistance
 - Ask mental health advocates and others with pertinent expertise to join your sexual assault response team (SART)
 - Request feedback from survivors with mental illness on the services provided
5. When providing support services to an incarcerated survivor with a mental illness, I would do the following: (*Review each of the options, identifying which responses are appropriate for an advocate, and which responses are not. Discuss your answers as a group.*)ⁱ
 1. Listen carefully and ask only those questions that are relevant and necessary
 2. Clarify the survivor's greatest need (it may NOT be related to their mental illness)
 3. Ask the survivor what their mental health diagnosis is
 4. Allow time to build rapport and trust
 5. Show compassion, respect and sensitivity
 6. Talk slowly and loudly so that the survivor can understand me
 7. Not make false promises
 8. Try to treat the survivor's mental illness
 9. Avoid making assumptions
 10. Inform the survivor of their rights under PREA
 11. Discuss coping skills
 12. Ask the survivor what medications they're taking
 13. Tell the survivor that their problems are all in their head
 14. Share resources and referrals with the survivor

15. Assess the survivor's sense of their own safety
16. Ask the survivor about their criminal charge(s) or conviction(s)
17. Dismiss aspects of their survivor account that may seem delusional
18. Focus on helping the survivor work through their feelings

Additional Resources

Resources Related to the PREA Standards

- For links to the PREA standards and other resources for the corrections field, visit the National PREA Resource Center, at www.prearesourcecenter.org/
- The "PREA Audit Supplementary Questionnaire on Community Advocate Engagement", www.justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Supplementary-Questionnaire-on-Community-Advocate-Engagement.pdf. The questionnaire may be useful for victim advocates to review as they prepare to speak with a PREA auditor about conditions in the facilities where they provide services
- PREA Standards in Focus includes an in-depth look at PREA's requirements on screening inmates for vulnerability, including having a mental illness:
 - Screening for Risk of Sexual Victimization and Abusiveness, www.prearesourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/library/115.41_0.pdf
- "Using a Prevention, Trauma-Informed Framework When Implementing PREA" is a training series created by the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, available at www.prearesourcecenter.org/file/3798/using-prevention-trauma-informed-framework-when-implementing-prea

Accounts from Survivors with Mental Illness

- *Survivor Voices: Troy*, www.justdetention.org/media_type/video/
- *Survivor Stories: Frank*, www.justdetention.org/story/frank/?pageno=3

Webinars and Other Resources

- JDI's resources for advocates can be found at: www.justdetention.org/advocate-resources
- *Nowhere Else to Go*, a JDI webinar for advocates on helping incarcerated survivors with mental illness, can be found at: www.justdetention.org/webinar/nowhere-else-to-go-incarcerated-survivors-with-mental-illness/#search
- "Serious Mental Illness Prevalence in Jails and Prisons" (Background Paper), www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/evidence-and-research/learn-more-about/3695

National Organizations Addressing Mental Health in Detention Settings

- American Psychiatric Association, www.psychiatry.org
- American Psychological Association, www.apa.org
- Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights, www.prisonerhealth.org
- Council on State Governments Justice Center, www.csgjusticecenter.org
- Prison Policy Initiative, www.prisonpolicy.org

- Mental Health America, www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org
- National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, www.nasmhpd.org
- Urban Institute, www.urban.org
- Treatment Advocacy Center, www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org

ⁱ The following options are not appropriate approaches for an advocate: 3, 6, 8, 12, 13, 16, and 17.