

Supporting Survivors with a History of Incarceration: Interview with Cynthia Totten and Dave Rini

Roughly 200,000 people are sexually abused in U.S. prisons and jails each year. Given that sexual abuse is highly under-reported both in the community and in detention, this figure likely represents just a fraction of this issue. For this interview, [Kaitlin Kall](#) of the Vera Institute of Justice and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims spoke to two experts about supporting formerly incarcerated survivors of sexual violence. Cynthia Totten is Deputy Executive Director of [Just Detention International](#), an advocacy organization dedicated to ending sexual abuse in confinement settings. Dave Rini is the Program Manager for the [Boston Area Rape Crisis Center's Incarcerated Survivor Support Program](#).

Programs that support people during reentry (the transition from incarceration to being back home in the community), typically provide logistical and material assistance – helping with housing stability, job applications, getting identification, etc. Why do you think connecting people to victim services, particularly sexual assault services, should be a component of reentry?

Dave: For the many survivors who haven't had the chance to get substantive support, sexual trauma can pose very real barriers when coming home after incarceration. Unresolved trauma can make it hard for some people to hold on to jobs or stay in programs, because triggering events can lead to panic attacks, outbursts that seem random to their new colleagues, or things like depression. It can also be hard for survivors to structure the many logistical tasks of reentry like getting a driver's license or making appointments because these tasks consume a lot of time and energy. Trauma can be a complicating factor for re-entry: it makes every other task someone has to do more difficult.

In general, how do you recommend that a reentry provider or advocate respond to a disclosure of sexual abuse or trauma from a client?

Cynthia: First and foremost, respond to that person as you would to any survivor, regardless of incarceration history. Start by demonstrating that you believe them and are taking seriously what they are saying. Many people working in reentry

have a lot of expertise in trauma. So, think about what types of responses you would have if the person shared some other piece of tough news that may be more familiar to you, like getting rejected from a transitional housing program. You may wish to say something along the lines of, “Wow, I’m really sorry that happened to you. What kind of support would be helpful to you now? Maybe I can provide this help or connect you with another organization that can.”

What guidance do you have for reentry providers who find that sexual assault is a difficult topic to address with their clients?

Dave: We are working on a project to address this right now. We’ve heard that staff can be nervous about directly asking about past sexual victimization. Our formerly incarcerated advisors have helped us shape questions that are less direct, which may be helpful. For example, during intake at a reentry organization a staff member could say, “Here’s a list of services – housing, employment, mental health, sexual assault – that many of our clients ask to be connected with. Do you want assistance in any of these areas?” This can help avoid making people feel like they are being singled out.

In what ways have you heard formerly incarcerated survivors make disclosures about past victimization?

Dave: It may come out almost as if it’s a passing comment or side note. This may feel odd to the person getting the disclosure. We may expect disclosures to be pretty sad, have a lot of tears involved, or to come with a certain amount of vulnerability. But sometimes the clients we work with in these settings feel like they can't show strong emotion yet or perhaps their version of showing vulnerability doesn't look like our own version of vulnerability.

Our society struggles to see both formerly incarcerated people and men as being “victims.” This sentiment can then be internalized. How do you approach supporting someone who does not self-identify as a victim or a survivor?

Dave: Especially in my program working with incarcerated survivors, it is actually pretty rare that somebody tells me they have been raped. That is just not the word they use, so I try to listen to whatever language they use to describe their experiences and mirror this same language in our conversation. We can validate the strength and courage it took for them to share their experience with us

without needing to say, “What happened to you was rape.” We’ve had good results working with folks that recognize these incidents had lasting impacts on them even if they don’t – and may never – identify as a victim or a survivor.

If a survivor does not use the word “victim” or even “sexual assault” to describe their experience, we can still discuss: “Is it hard for you to think about that experience now? Do you have difficulty sleeping because you think about it? Is this something you wish you thought less about?” If the answer to any of these questions is “yes”, we are able to offer help.

Just Detention International helps agencies such as prisons and rape crisis centers form working partnerships. What guidance do you have for a reentry program interested in establishing a connection with a sexual assault service provider?

Cynthia: First, we recommend looking locally for a rape crisis center or a victim service provider in your area. One way to do this is to look up service providers on [Just Detention International’s website](#). Each of these service providers have said that they are open to working with currently and presumably formerly incarcerated survivors. Then, get to know the people working there. Approach the conversation with curiosity and openness by sharing about your program and taking interest in the services the rape crisis center provides. Assume that you have a lot to learn from one another. You can also reach out to your state’s sexual assault coalition, and I’d approach the conversation with them in the same way.

Once you’ve gotten to know one another, we recommend that you memorialize the partnership or referral process in writing with a memorandum of understanding. This is an important piece, as it memorializes the relationship, regardless of any staffing turnover.

What advice do you have for mainstream rape crisis centers who wish to expand or improve their services for formerly incarcerated survivors?

Cynthia: I think first, take a step back and assess your capacity to work with male survivors, LGBTQ survivors, people of color, and other marginalized groups who are more likely to experience incarceration. Then, take time to learn about your

local criminal justice system. Tour a correctional facility near you and learn more about the dynamics of incarceration.

What else would you like service providers to know about supporting formerly incarcerated survivors?

Cynthia: When a formerly incarcerated survivor shares with you about his or her experience, there's a good chance that you may be the only person that he or she can share this with who is going to treat them with respect, dignity, and empathy. Our society often reacts as if sexual assault in confinement is just what happens to people who end up in prison or that it's the survivor's fault. You may be the only person who responds as if she or he has *been wronged* as opposed to someone who has *done wrong*. No matter where you work, that's a crucial component of providing a supportive response.

To learn more about the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims and other available resources, please contact reachingvictims@vera.org.