



# COVID-19 Survivor Impact Briefs

## People with Incarceration Histories

The National Resource Center for Reaching Victims conducted a series of listening sessions to unearth the impact the COVID-19 health crisis is having on underserved victims of crime and better resource the crime victim services field to respond to those needs.

This brief summarizes the issues and strategies that emerged from listening sessions on survivors with incarceration histories.

### Introduction

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are at high risk for contracting the coronavirus and often have little or no access to reliable and consistent health care services. The health risks coupled with the challenge of practicing social distancing in jails and prisons have led correctional facilities around the country, particularly local jails, to accelerate releases. In many cases, however, people are returning home to the challenging, new reality of life during a global pandemic with very little access to the supportive services they might normally get during their reentry period (e.g., assistance with housing, employment, and transportation). Accessing healing services—often difficult under normal circumstances—appears to be even more challenging, as most providers have shifted to remote service provision, and not all survivors have access to reliable technology to avail themselves of remote services. The good news is that reentry and victim service providers are coming together to name the needs and challenges they are seeing in this population of survivors, exchange ideas, and find creative solutions. This brief explores some of those needs and creative solutions shared during listening sessions, strategy sessions, and conversations with survivors.

## **The COVID-19 health crisis is compounding the trauma experienced by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated survivors and limiting opportunities for safety and stability.**

- Service providers—many with lived experience of victimization and incarceration—are seeing higher levels of stress and anxiety among the people they serve. With the resources they have, they are striving to bolster behavioral health services and case management, so they can meet the needs of their clients. Some are also trying to create or take advantage of existing online communities that can provide peer support and ideas for how to help clients during this uncertain time.
- For people returning home, part of their trauma and anxiety is connected to a lack of safe housing. Victim service providers who work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are deeply concerned about the lack of options for safe housing, particularly for formerly incarcerated survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Many fear that these survivors are being forced to return to their abusers because of challenges in accessing shelter systems during the pandemic. Some providers are trying to think creatively about how to support clients with safe housing in places like motels. Others are trying to maintain some contact with clients, even those who are homeless, by using masks and visiting them to provide gift cards for food and hygiene products.

## **Reentry and victim service providers are facing increased barriers to reaching and communicating with survivors; yet many are developing creative solutions.**

- Service providers who work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated survivors are having a difficult time making and maintaining contact with their clients. Because of various lockdowns in correctional facilities due to COVID-19, some rape crisis programs have reported a dramatic decline in hotline calls from jails and prisons. Others have observed that people leaving facilities, particularly jails, are being released without adequate access to services, including services that support housing and health care.

- Many programs that work inside facilities are pivoting to sending letters and coursework by mail while in-person visits and programming are suspended. This includes working with facilities to distribute games, puzzles, and information about victim services to incarcerated people (including phone numbers), so people know that the providers are still there and care about them. Some advocates, however, fear that mail correspondence to people in jail and prison has compromised confidentiality.
- Many community-based organizations have shifted to offering services remotely. Some have developed creative outreach strategies like posting information about services on bulletin boards at local grocery stores. Some rape crisis centers and other programs have also set up new hotlines and have started providing services by phone that are typically provided in person (e.g., advocates supporting survivors by phone before and after a sexual assault medical forensic exam).
- Although a lot of service providers have rapidly transitioned to providing services remotely, many formerly incarcerated people do not have the necessary technology and/or lack cell and internet service to benefit from remote services. To address these needs, some providers are working with nonprofits and/or government partners to get cell phones and phone numbers of service providers in the hands of people coming home.

### **Service providers who are used to working with their clients in person may need support to transition to virtual service provision.**

- Most service providers are used to providing in-person support to survivors. They may need help in shifting to using video conferencing or the phone to support their clients.
- Many practitioners who run programs have been working hard to support staff through this health crisis, connecting regularly for team meetings, and making sure staff have the tools they need to provide services virtually.

## **About the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims**

The National Resource Center for Reaching Victims (NRC) is a clearinghouse for victim service providers, culturally specific organizations, criminal justice professionals, and policymakers to get information and expert guidance to enhance their capacity to identify, reach, and serve all victims, especially those from communities that are underrepresented in healing services and avenues to justice. For more information about the NRC, visit the NRC's website at <http://reachingvictims.org>.

## **About the Vera Institute of Justice, Center on Victimization and Safety**

The Vera Institute of Justice's Center on Victimization and Safety convenes the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims and provides leadership and staffing around the NRC's work to center survivors with incarceration histories. The Center on Victimization and Safety works with communities around the country to create healing services and justice options that reach, appeal to, and benefit all survivors. Our work focuses on communities of people who are at elevated risk of harm but often marginalized from the organizations and systems designed to support victims. For more information on the Center on Victimization and Safety, please contact [cvs@vera.org](mailto:cvs@vera.org).

This resource was produced by the Vera Institute of Justice under award #2016-XV-GX-K015, awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this (insert type of product) are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.