

# Working with Victims who are Inmates

By Hallie Martyniuk



Working with inmate sexual assault victims is different from working with any other victim population and not everyone is cut out for this work. What follows are some things to consider before working with this population:

1. Does the idea of entering a prison make you uncomfortable? If it does, you are not alone. Many people feel very uncomfortable entering a corrections facility. When entering a prison, you are entering a world that is completely unknown and unrecognizable. People are kept in 'cages,' every door has a lock, the facilities are very noisy and can be, for some, claustrophobic.
2. Are you uncomfortable with confined spaces?
3. Are you willing to accept that the victim/inmate may try to take advantage of you? Can you balance providing him or her support while still being cautious of manipulation?

#### 4. Are you?

- Easily befriended
- Overly friendly or overly familiar with most people
- Naïve to intentions or hidden messages
- Gullible to stories
- Susceptible to the you/me syndrome
- Sympathetic to others' problems so much so that rules seem secondary
- Timid

#### 5. Do you?

- Know how to handle compliments in a business-like manner
- Share personal problems
- Have a trusting nature
- Believe what you are told without checking on the validity of the information
- Have a desire to help the underdog
- Return favor for favor
- Have difficulty taking command or control

- Ignore slightly personal or embarrassing remarks and forget instead of directly and immediately addressing them
  - Have difficulty saying no
  - Circumvent minor rules
6. Can you?
- Be made to feel obligated
  - Be made to look the other way or pretend not to notice if the rule being violated is “no big thing”

Interestingly some of the above traits are exactly the same traits that employers look for when hiring sexual assault counselor/advocates. Being kind, empathetic, and having a trusting nature and a desire to help people is a strength in the eyes of the employer **but can be seen as a weakness in the eyes of the inmates**. Answering yes to the above questions does not mean you need to change your approach, it just means that you should proceed with caution and be open to alternative approaches with inmates.

## COUNSELING WITHIN THE CORRECTIONS FACILITY

The PREA Compliance Manager at the institution will work with you to arrange a day and time for you to counsel the inmate victim. **Remember that the inmate must request a visit with a sexual assault counselor.** The counselor/advocate cannot initiate the visit.

The PREA Compliance Manager will arrange for you to have a gate pass. When you visit the facility, your identification will be checked to ensure that it matches the information provided by the PREA Compliance Manager. So be sure that you give the PREA Compliance Manager accurate and up-to-date information.

### CONTACT VISITS

If an inmate is in general population, he/she is allowed to have visits in the visiting area that is supervised by facility staff. Limited physical contact is allowed during these visits. The inmate is not restrained during contact visits; however he/she are strip searched before and after the visit.

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The PREA Compliance Manager is the main point of contact for the community based counselor/advocate. The PREA Compliance Manager will accompany the victim throughout the institution’s internal response to the assault and then notify the community-based sexual assault program that a victim is being brought to the hospital for an examination. Following the assault, the PREA Compliance Manager will be the person who will set up counseling sessions between the sexual assault counselor/advocate and the inmate victim.

Sexual assault counselors will not be permitted contact visits the first time they visit a victim/inmate. This is for the safety of the counselor and is designed to help the counselor/advocate get acclimated to the prison environment in a more secure setting. The counselor/advocate may request contact visits after the initial meeting. These requests will be reviewed by institution staff. Again, the safety of the counselor/advocate is the paramount concern.

### IDENTIFICATION

Make sure that you have proper identification when you arrive at the facility or you will not be able to visit. You will need photo identification, such as a driver’s license, passport, or government identification card.

You will be asked to sign in upon your arrival and again upon departure. You will be asked for identification so signatures can be compared. You will be asked to provide the make of your vehicle and license plate number.

*When visitors enter a prison, they are only allowed to retain their identification and car keys. Sexual assault counselors will be permitted to bring paper, a pen or pencil, worksheets and brochures, in addition to these items. Anything you bring into the institution should be cleared with the PREA Compliance Manager prior to your visit.*

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“When you first began working with some police officers, you may be met with some negative responses. You will have to earn your stripes.”

—Pamela L. Behr,  
Victim Assistance Coordinator,  
Office of the Victim Advocate

### CLOTHING

When you visit the facility you need to be aware of what you are wearing. Remember that you will have to go through a metal detector similar to airport security. The metal detectors at the institutions are very sensitive and may signal for metal snaps on clothing, underwire bras, body piercings, jewelry, etc. If this is the case, the security officer will use a hand-held wand.

Use common sense when dressing to visit a prison. Wear clothing in which you are comfortable, but nothing that will call inappropriate attention to you, such as short skirts, low-cut blouses, tank-tops, etc.

### TELEPHONE CALLS

The inmate is permitted to make phone calls depending on his/her location and custody level. The inmate will have a choice of calling collect or prepaying for his/her calls by taking the money from his/her account. The inmate will not be able to use phone cards. The inmate is assigned specified hours for use of the telephone and are given a specified amount of time to talk.

If the victim/inmate wishes to call his sexual assault counselor/advocate to schedule an appointment, he/she is to notify his/her corrections counselor, who will in turn notify the PREA Compliance Manager or speak with the PREA Compliance Manager directly, if opportunity allows.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING YOUR CREDIBILITY

A prison is a world unto itself; self-contained. They have their own store, laundry, school, doctors, dentists, a worship facility, food service, psychiatrists, teachers, counselors, drug and alcohol programs, sexual assault programs, policies, and procedures. When possible, individual institutions prefer to handle everything “in house.” As an advocate, coming from “the outside,” you may meet resistance.

Prisons are militaristic environments with the simple objective of custody, care, and control of the inmate population. Sexual assault counselors, coming from an empowerment philosophy, may be seen as ‘bleeding hearts,’ ‘tissue carriers,’ or potential problems. Advocates are trained to believe crime victims, unless proven differently. Institution staff works with a population of convicted criminals who are known to manipulate the truth to their advantage. Corrections staff cannot afford to believe what an inmate says at face value. When interviewed, a Pennsylvania corrections officer shared that when he gets a report from an inmate about an incident or a crime being committed, he does not believe the inmate unless there is evidence, “Is anyone bleeding?”

To build successful collaborations with corrections and to build your own credibility, advocates must familiarize themselves with the very different world of corrections. Here are some suggestions to help you with that process:

### 1. Ask questions.

You don't lose credibility by asking, you lose credibility by assuming incorrectly.

### 2. Take a tour of the facility.

Prisons are a complete unknown for most people; take the time to see and understand the environment where corrections staff work and where inmates live before you are asked to go into the institution to see a victim.

### 3. Learn everything you can about how the institutions operate.

Ask all the questions you can before you enter the institution for counseling. A tour of the facility is a wonderful opportunity for you to ask questions.

### 4. Develop personal relationships with corrections staff, particularly members of the institution-based SART, when applicable.

The PREA Compliance Manager is going to be your main point of contact with in the prison when offering services to a victim/inmate. Get to know him or her, understand their schedule, and learn about what they do and how they do it. Make sure to discuss what the best method of communication will be. Typically, administration has voicemail and access to email from outside of the institution. However, not all positions have access to one or both. In addition, some positions have set schedules, such as administration, psychology, counseling, etc. These typically are regular work week hours of 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. Other positions such as medical or corrections officers may work shifts that vary. So it is important to discuss this with the person that you are connecting with. Remember, the person in the PREA Compliance Manager position can be from any department or job classification in the institution and so all of these things will vary.

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## There are three mistakes in language and accuracy of the information within the paragraph below. The mistakes are identified below.

The inmate screamed, "Yo, I need to use the toilet, let me outta here!" Within a few minutes, the prison guard unlocked the cell door and escorted the inmate to the bathroom. When the inmate came out of the bathroom he and the guard spent a few minutes talking. The guard knew the prisoner had been upset over problems with his wife and he asked how things were going. The prisoner was grateful that the guard showed an interest in his family life and spent the next few minutes telling him about his concerns that his wife is not being faithful to the marriage and that she is not spending enough time with their kids. After describing his situation to the guard, the inmate asked him about his son, who he knew was trying to get into college that year and was hoping to be accepted at Penn State. The guard chatted about his son's hopes for college acceptance while the two men walked back to the inmate's cell.

#### MISTAKES:

1. Prisoners do not leave cells to use bathroom. Toilets are in the cells.
2. Employees within the corrections system prefer being called corrections officers. Calling a corrections officer a prison guard will show both ignorance and a lack of respect.
3. It is against DOC policy for corrections officers to get to know inmates on a personal level and to share personal information, as it interferes with their ability to keep custody and control. Staff is told not to discuss any personal information at any time while at work as inmates are always listening and can use it against you to blackmail you.



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: WORKING WITH PRISONS

### Does everyone who works in the prison wear a uniform?

No. Within the prison you will find three groups: uniformed staff, 'white shirts,' and staff that wear street clothes.

### What is the prison staff hierarchy?

The prison hierarchy is very similar to the military and law enforcement. From the top to the bottom you will find the following hierarchy within the individual institutions:

#### Uniformed Officers:

- Correction Officers in Training (COT)
- Correction Officers (CO1)
- Unit Sergeants (CO2)
- Lieutenants (CO3)

#### White Shirts

- Captains (CO4) Identified by two bars on shoulders
- Major (CO5) Gold eagle on hat and collar

#### Plain Clothes

- Deputy Superintendent (two per facility)
- Centralized Services (treatment staff<sup>1</sup>)/ Facilities Management
- Superintendent<sup>2</sup>

### Is it true that inmate sexual assault victims will lie about an assault?

There is no simple answer to this question. As advocates, we believe sexual assault victims are telling the truth, unless evidence to the contrary. We recognize that occasionally for a variety of reasons, sexual assault victims may not be completely truthful about all the details of an assault. Within the community, a sexual assault victim may lie to cover up his/her participation in illegal activities (such as drug involvement) or to cover-up infidelity. This is no different in prison. However, when working with inmate sexual assault victims, you need to keep your antenna up and your eyes open. It may sound terrible to say, but prisoners can be extremely manipulative. They may make up stories of assaults to have their cell changed, to get back at someone, or to avoid being labeled homosexual, among other reasons.

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**To assist you in understanding these positions, here is a comparison of the corrections hierarchy to law enforcement:**

CORRECTIONS	LAW ENFORCEMENT
COT	Rookie
CO1 – Corrections Officer	Uniformed Officers
CO2 – Sergeant	Uniformed Police Squad Leaders or Shift Commanders
CO3 – Lieutenants	Uniformed Police Lieutenants
CO4 – Captains	Plain Clothes Detective



That is NOT to say that sexual assault doesn't happen in prisons, but you must be aware of the difference in the population when working with prisoners. Even when sexual assault accusations are real, inmates may use the situation to their advantage. For example, they may try to use the opportunity they have to see an advocate as a chance to talk about things other than the assault. Advocates must be aware of the possibility of manipulation.

### **What is unique about sexual assault in prison?**

Incarcerated sexual assault victims can experience the same traumatic effects as other sexual assault victims (sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, self-blame, physical soreness and injury, etc.). The differences result from the environment in which they live.

- Within the prison environment, it is difficult to protect a victim's privacy. Lack of privacy can impact the victim's ability to heal in the prison environment. There are few places for a victim to go to cry, process the events, and be alone with shared living and working space.
- Separating the victim from the offender may be difficult. Although a sexual assault victim should not be placed back in a cell with his/her alleged perpetrator, it is virtually impossible for him/her to avoid the perpetrator entirely unless one of them is transferred to another institution.
- The concept of being "a snitch" is very much a part of prison culture. Within prison there are two groups, staff and inmates. This translates into a 'them or us' mentality. When an inmate reports a sexual assault they are opening themselves up to harassment from the offender, the offender's friends, or fellow gang members. The concept of retribution is alive

and well within prison walls and reporting a sexual assault can, at times, be risky business.


- Prison rape victims are away from their friends and family and have little or no support system. This is one area where a sexual assault counselor/advocate can be particularly helpful. By providing the victim someone to talk to about the assault. The advocate is giving him/her an opportunity for compassion and support.
- Victims may have concerns for their safety after a report of sexual assault. He/she may feel that there are no safe locations. If an inmate sexual assault victim is in fear for their own safety, it is important you advise prison staff immediately. (See the section on confidentiality and the release of information for more on this topic.)
- A victim's emotional reactions to the assault may be exacerbated by the prison environment. This is an area where the sexual assault counselor/advocate should collaborate with the prison staff (through your contact, the PREA Compliance Manager, counselors, etc.) to meet the victim's needs for mental health services to assist him/her in dealing with the assault.
- Male prisons are hyper-masculine environments where feelings of "helplessness and

powerlessness" are not acceptable. If the sexual assaults are male on male, they are further complicated by the stigma of homosexuality. Fear of being viewed as homosexual may be a barrier to reporting for two reasons: concerns about the stigma and also concerns that if they report the assault, the assault will be viewed by security and staff as a homosexual.

### What is it like in there?

Prisons can be noisy. Some individuals may find it claustrophobic, due to the fact that a locked door may not be opened until another is closed. This can necessitate you standing briefly in relatively small spaces in between locked doors.

In many cases it will not be necessary for you to walk through areas in which you will be with the general prison population, but it is possible. If you do go into the prison you may see inmates walking from one place to another without prison staff. However, you will always be accompanied by prison staff and your safety will not be an issue. It has been said that it is safer in prisons than outside of them. This is referring to the extent of the custody and control that exists and the fact that at least on the "inside" you know who the "bad guys" are.

You may be faced with cat calls, similar to walking by construction sites. Prisoners do this for attention. The best advice is to ignore their behavior. 

## ENDNOTES

1 Treatment staff includes education staff, counselors on the block, unit managers, psychology department, and medical staff.

2 Formally known as the prison warden.

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