

Believe
Listen
Empower
Support
prioritize **Safety**

Supporting Survivor Reentrants who
Disclose Sexual Abuse

*In collaboration with The North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault,
Orange County Local Reentry Council, Orange County Rape Crisis Center,
and Just Detention International*

North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault



Orange County
Rape Crisis Center
Support. Education. Advocacy.



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Supporting Survivor Reentrants who
Disclose Sexual Abuse

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Purpose: This resource was created for Local Reentry Council staff to reference when a survivor re-entrant discloses previous or current experiences of sexual abuse.

- More than 1 in 3 women experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during her lifetime.¹
- Nearly 1 in 4 men experience sexual violence involving physical contact during his lifetime.¹
- One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives.²
- One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old.²
- 46.4% lesbians, 74.9% bisexual women and 43.3% heterosexual women reported sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes, while 40.2% gay men, 47.4% bisexual men and 20.8% heterosexual men reported sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes.²

Approximately 200,000 people are sexually abused behind bars every year in the U.S. Remember this is the number of people, not incidents. Most of these people are victimized multiple times:

- Studies show that **corrections staff** are as likely to commit sexual abuse as are prisoners (incarcerated people).
- **1 in 10 former adult state inmates** reported being sexually abused while in detention.
- **7.1% of youth in juvenile facilities** reported being sexually abused while in detention.
- Transgender women are at an incredibly heightened risk of sexual abuse. It is estimated that 40% of transgender women in U.S. prisons and jails experience sexual abuse each year.
- It is estimated that **in women's prisons, some 80% or more** of people have experienced prior sexual abuse (or) domestic violence.

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Given these numbers, it is very likely you are working with someone who is a survivor of sexual violence.

Even though many would rather not talk about it, because of its prevalence, **those in the Human Services field must be equipped to understand the basics about sexual violence** and how to connect people to resources, especially as it pertains to reentry work. **The terms *sexual violence*, *assault*, *harm*, and *abuse* will be used interchangeably in this resource to provide the broadest understanding of unwanted sexual activity or childhood sexual abuse.**

We acknowledge the limitations of these terms to accurately reflect people's experiences. We also acknowledge the discomfort people experience in talking about it--this includes not only survivors, but LRC staff as well, who also may be survivors. Reentrants may not feel safe in disclosing sexual abuse. **This trauma-informed resource takes those things into account and provides staff with skills to help survivor reentrants navigate that difficult space.**

In your interaction with re-entrants as Local Reentry Council personnel, you may receive disclosures of past or current sexual harm. Many survivors choose not to talk about any past experiences of sexual trauma, even when prompted by people they trust. Resources for sexual assault should always be available, even when a client does not disclose.

This resource was created for LRC staff for reference when a survivor re-entrant discloses previous or current traumatic experiences of sexual assault, sexual abuse, or sex trafficking. Disclosures may be made at any time and in a variety of settings, but discussions about sexual abuse are best in a private, confidential, 1-on-1 setting where and when the survivor feels safe. Contact your local rape crisis center for additional resources or further assistance.

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What is Sexual Violence?

- **Sexual violence exists on a continuum** and includes rape, or any unwanted sexual activity. It also includes any childhood sexual abuse and sexual contact that is prohibited by law. People use sexual violence to hurt, humiliate, gain control, or exert power over someone else. It can also be used to coerce others to perform labor or other activity.
- Sexual violence can be coerced by threats, bribes and manipulation. It can also happen by abuse of authority. **All of these are common in detention settings.**
- **Even if a person doesn't say no, make any outcry, resist, fight back, or call for help, it does not mean they have consented** to sexual activity. Also, people who are drugged or incapacitated cannot consent to sex. Incarcerated persons cannot consent to any sexual activity with staff.
- Sexual violence can be **perpetrated by strangers, acquaintances, family members, caretakers, or those in authority.** It can even be committed by **someone's consensual sexual partner.**
- **Those at greater risk for experiencing sexual abuse include people with cognitive delays, developmental disabilities, mental illness, people who identify as LGBT+, and those with previous sexual victimization.**
- Survivors of child sexual abuse often struggle with unwanted memories and trauma into adulthood, but may be **very reluctant to talk about what happened.**
- Detainees cannot consent to sexual activity with staff because they are in their care. **All sexual contact between staff and detainees is prohibited and considered abuse, according to the Prison Rape Elimination Act standards.**

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Human Trafficking and Incarceration

Human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking, is a type of sexual violence. **It happens when someone is forced or coerced by physical and/or sexual violence to sell things, work for someone, or trade sex for something.** Forced sex to pay off a debt or to buy or rent anything is a type of human trafficking.

- **Sometimes people are “bought” and “sold” without the survivor knowing it.** “Currency” can be drugs, commissary items, or paying off a debt. Phrases like “prison husband,” “getting married,” “hooking up,” or being called someone’s “ho” or “punk” may indicate human trafficking.
- **Protective pairing** is when a detainee is forced or coerced to provide sex to someone in exchange for safety.
- **A trafficker may be physically and sexually violent towards someone they traffic, but also show affection, or provide protection.**
- **Re-entrants may have been forced to engage in transactional sex as a means of survival** while incarcerated or prior to incarceration.
- **A trafficker can continue the control post-release,** and force a re-entrant to pay off a debt they incurred while incarcerated. A re-entrant **can be recruited while incarcerated** into trafficking situations post release, by a false job offer, for example.
- **This kind of sexual violence can be very confusing** to a survivor, and they can blame themselves, or be too afraid or ashamed to talk about it. The terminology around “human trafficking” may not be helpful or relatable to the survivor. **How the survivor defines their experience is completely up to them and is their right. We should mirror the language they use to talk about what has happened to them.**

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About Disclosures

- **Many formerly incarcerated survivors (especially men) do not relate to terms like 'victim', sexual violence, etc.** A disclosure will not always involve this terminology.
- **The way men talk about sexual violence can feel very different than how women talk about it.** Men may use more explicit, or direct language which may feel confusing.
- Disclosures may look like someone referring to 'some stuff that happened' or 'I had to do some stuff.'
- And even though **sexual violence is never the survivor's fault, they may talk about like it was a choice, or the best option available to them, or even protect/defend their abuser. They may minimize or normalize the harm. This is normal for survivors, especially for those who have experienced sexual abuse within correctional settings.**
- **Staying "quiet" about trading sex or sexual abuse is a choice of safety- a tradeoff.** Admission of victimization will be seen as weakness. Disclosing or reporting sexual abuse, or rape while incarcerated can compromise a survivor's sense of physical and emotional safety. There is fear of retaliation or that the information will be used against them.

If you receive a disclosure, or if someone wants to talk about what happened to them, remember what you can and cannot do in the moment. You are not expected to be a therapist, solve the problem, or make it better. **In the moment, your only responsibility is to be a safe, non judgmental recipient of the disclosure.** You may be the first person they have ever disclosed to, and your response can influence whether they share again or seek further support. You can counter society's responses of shame, disgust, and blame with nonjudgmental support. Rely on the expertise that you already have in working with re-entrants. You already understand the trauma of detention from your work and perhaps your own lived experience.

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BLESS is an acronym that can guide you to respond to disclosures of sexual abuse in a trauma-sensitive and safe way.

Believe: Be present and non-judgmental. Avoid asking "Why" questions (e.g. "Why didn't you say anything before?") because they can come across as blaming. Focus on responding calmly and with assurance.

Try this: "I hear you," "I believe you," or "I'm sorry that happened to you."

Listen: This is often the thing survivors need most. **Listen attentively and give your full attention to the survivor. Active listening means you are trying to understand the feelings behind what the person is saying- not waiting to jump in with your own opinion or solutions.** Often well-intentioned attempts to direct, warn, advise, teach, find out more information, or even heap praise on the survivor can backfire because they focus on what you have to say rather than on what the survivor is saying. Avoid trying to connect with the survivor by saying things like "I know how you feel" or pretending to understand something you do not. You may feel like you aren't doing enough, but don't underestimate the importance of this step.

Try this: Reflect what you're hearing- the emotions- back to the person speaking. You may consider phrases like "It sounds like you're feeling _____. Is that right?, or "It is normal and okay to feel _____. If you don't understand something, ask, "Would you like to talk more about _____?"

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Empower: Sexual violence takes away the survivor's control over their life. Sexual trauma in addition to the trauma from incarceration--constant surveillance, strip searches, solitary confinement, and witnessing the physical and sexual violence of others can compound feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. **Make every effort to let survivors make their own decisions. Frame questions in a way that prioritizes their choice. Help them understand their options.** You may have strong opinions about what the person ought to do- for example, file a police report or seek medical attention. You can share those as options, but it is important that you do not pressure or force them to take any steps they don't want to take. **Provide all the information they need from them to take the next step. Respect their choice to decline services.** Providing information empowers while pressuring someone to follow a course of action disempowers. Your language should reflect a person-centered approach. If a survivor chooses to engage in legal, medical, or any other kinds of resolution, they may benefit from trained advocacy. You can help them connect with your local rape crisis center or survivor advocacy center.

Try this: "You deserve support. Would you like me to call anyone?". Also consider asking questions that help the person gain control of the moment such as "Do you want to get up and walk around?" or "Do you want some water?".

A Word about Confidentiality:

Provide all the information a survivor needs to be able to take the next step in empowering, including clear information about the limitations of confidentiality. It builds trust to be honest and transparent about what you can and cannot keep confidential.

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Letting the person know you will protect their privacy and will not use anything they say against them in the course of your work together. Below are some non exhaustive exceptions.

Questions for LRC Personnel:

- Beyond being a mandated reporter for cases of caregiver abuse, are you **accountable to any other policies related to your role that limit confidentiality**, for example, if a survivor discloses sexual abuse from detention staff per Prison Rape Elimination Act standards?
- **Does your organization have a protocol for mandated reporting?** If anyone else besides Child Protective Services must be notified, it may be important to communicate that to the survivor.

Rape crisis center advocates provide their services while observing the following:

- **Confidentiality & Limits:** Everything that a person shares with rape crisis center staff is confidential unless the person threatens harm to themselves or others, discloses abuse or neglect of child, or discloses abuse or neglect of a vulnerable adult.
- **Advocate Privilege:** Communications between rape crisis center advocates and a person seeking or accessing services (i.e., client) are privileged. This means that rape crisis center advocates cannot share information about the client, including their name or other identifying information, without written consent from the client. The client is the one who decides for what purposes their information can be used.
- **Limits of Advocate Privilege:** There are instances when a court will order that information be shared by rape crisis center advocates, but the information or service records can only be released under very specific circumstances.

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Local rape crisis centers can be powerful allies in serving survivor re-entrants because of their confidentiality policies. Be prepared to know how to make referrals when appropriate.

***Try this:** Before we keep talking, I'd like to go over some safety and privacy information. Is that ok? I also want to let you know that what we talk about will be confidential, which means I'm not going to share it with anyone outside our agency, unless you share information about a specific plan to hurt yourself, someone else, or if a minor, or someone with a caregiver is being abused. Do you have any questions about that?*

Support: Survivors should know they are deserving of support no matter the circumstances of their assault. Offer appropriate support based on your role. Avoid statements such as "I'm here for you- anything you need." You may not be available 24/7 for them, but your local rape crisis center can be. Similarly, avoid making promises you can't keep. For example, don't say "Everything is going to be alright"- you don't know that, and it can come across as empty and insincere. Be mindful of community supervision, parole, and probation restrictions when helping a survivor connect to services. Also, **be aware of not projecting your emotions into the situation. This can be difficult, but essential to center what the survivor is saying and how they are feeling, not how you are feeling about it.** There should be space to process your own feelings later.

Try this: "You deserve support, and I want to give it. How would you like me support you right now? Moving forward?", "Can I connect you to someone else to talk more in depth and support you more than I can?"

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prioritize Safety: Disclosing past experiences of sexual violence can be draining and make the survivor feel especially vulnerable. These feelings can also make a person feel unsafe physically and emotionally/psychologically (depending on a variety of factors like physiological response to trauma/PTSD, societal gender norms, self-blame, self-guilt, etc.). Your recognition of and reaction to a survivor's feelings of unsafety can go a long way in reassuring them that their disclosure was received by an appropriate, trustworthy source.

Ask them how they are feeling. If they express feeling unsafe, unsure, or ambivalent about disclosing, reassure them that you are a safe person to share with (within the confidentiality limits of your organization or role). Ask them what you can do in the moment to help them to feel more safe. Do they need to get up and move to a different room? Do they need a referral to an agency that can find them a new place to live? Do they need to find an activity to take their mind off of the trauma they just shared? **Listen and respect what they know about keeping themselves safe. You can ask what has worked for them in the past, and what they are able to do now.** Identify the survivor's strengths and assist them to adapt these strengths to the current situation.

Try this: "Remember what I said about breaking confidentiality--outside of those reasons, I don't talk about any of this outside our meetings. Now, what are your plans tonight? Do you feel good about where you're staying?" Don't be afraid to ask if the survivor is having thoughts of self-harm. Provide referral to the suicide hotline if they are.

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Recognize your own feelings. It's normal to have feelings and reactions to a disclosure of sexual violence. As the recipient of that disclosure, you have held space for strong emotions. You may have personal experiences with sexual violence as a survivor or loved one of a survivor, and hearing someone else's disclosure can stir up personal feelings and unwanted memories as well. Anticipate this and consider your needs. Practicing self-care is important after a disclosure. Identify ahead of time a safe person to debrief with. You may want additional support to talk about your reaction while observing your limits of confidentiality.

Your local rape crisis center is a resource for friends, loved ones, and any service providers working with survivors of sexual violence. **Don't hesitate to call for support in processing your experience with a disclosure. You are not wasting their time; that is what they are there for.**



References

1. Smith, S.G., Zhang, X., Basile, K.C., Merrick, M.T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., Chen, J. (2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2015 Data Brief – Updated Release. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
2. National Sexual Violence Research Center. (2015). Statistics about Sexual Violence. https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf.

Essential Partnerships

It's important to establish collaborative partnerships with local and sometimes national service providers for education about referral processes and each other's work through cross training. It's important to be familiar with your local resources for sexual violence survivors, and in some cases your work can be strengthened with a formal agreement outlining how you'll work together. Here are some helpful things to know about your local rape crisis or victim's services provider:

- **Orange County Rape Crisis Center** provides a 24/7 Helpline: 919-967-7273, text 919-504-5211. There is also an online chat option on their website: ocrcc.org
- The **North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault's NC Rape Crisis Directory** provides contact information to your nearest rape crisis program: nccasa.org/get-help/
- **The Rape Abuse and Incest National Network RAINN Resources- Nationwide** refers callers to local service providers: rainn.org/resources
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** National Suicide Prevention Lifeline , 1-800-273-8255, suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- Just Detention International provides a survivor packet to people who have been sexually abused in detention and other resources for survivors and service providers. Find Local Services – Just Detention International: justdetention.org/resources/survivor-resources/find-local-services



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SUPPORT SURVIVOR REENTRANTS WHO DISCLOSE SEXUAL ABUSE

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prioritize Safety: Disclosures make a person feel vulnerable and unsafe. Your recognition of and reaction to these feelings reassures that their disclosure was received by a trustworthy source. Ask them what you can do in the moment to help them to feel more safe, what they know about keeping themselves safe, what has worked for them in the past, and what are they able to do now? Identify strengths to adapt these to the current situation.

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Did someone recently disclose to you that they were raped or sexually assaulted and you weren't quite sure what to say or do?

The Orange County Rape Crisis Center (OCRCC) provides support, education, and advocacy to survivors of sexual violence. OCRCC, and other rape crisis centers, also provides the same services to friends, family members, and ANYONE working with or supporting a survivor of sexual violence. This includes service providers and case managers!

If someone you are supporting or working with recently disclosed to you and you are feeling uncertain about your response or you are having difficulty processing what you heard, please connect with a trained advocate at OCRCC via our 24-hour Helpline.

Call (919) 967-7273

Text (919) 504-5211

Chat by visiting ocrcc.org

Is your organization interested in receiving training on how to respond to disclosures of sexual violence? Visit our website to fill-out a training request form.



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