

## ACTION UPDATE

SEPTEMBER 2015

**I**N AUGUST, I RECEIVED a phone call from Michelle Norsworthy, a JDI Survivor Council member. Michelle called to share amazing news: after nearly three decades behind bars, she had been released from prison that morning.

As you can imagine, I had many questions for Michelle, about how it felt finally to be free, and whether she had the support she needed to start settling into life on the outside. Yet



Michelle wanted to talk about the fight to stop rape in prison — and what she could do to help.

Michelle's unwavering commitment comes as no surprise to those who know her. Michelle, who is a transgender woman, endured years of sexual abuse in men's prisons in California. Working with JDI, she pushed the state to make its prisons safer, she worked as an inmate peer educator focusing on sexual abuse prevention, and, in April, she won a landmark federal court case. Given her accomplishments inside of prison, I can only imagine what she will achieve now that she is out.

Michelle's release was not the only news that gave JDI a boost recently. Just weeks earlier, President Obama made a historic speech in which he decried popular culture's dangerously flippant attitudes toward prisoner rape. The President's comments are evidence of a crucial shift in the national conversation about this violence — a shift made possible by survivors, like Michelle Norsworthy.

Lovisa Stannow  
Executive Director

## 46 States — and Counting

*Vast Majority of States Commit to Lifesaving Standards Aimed at Ending Prisoner Rape*

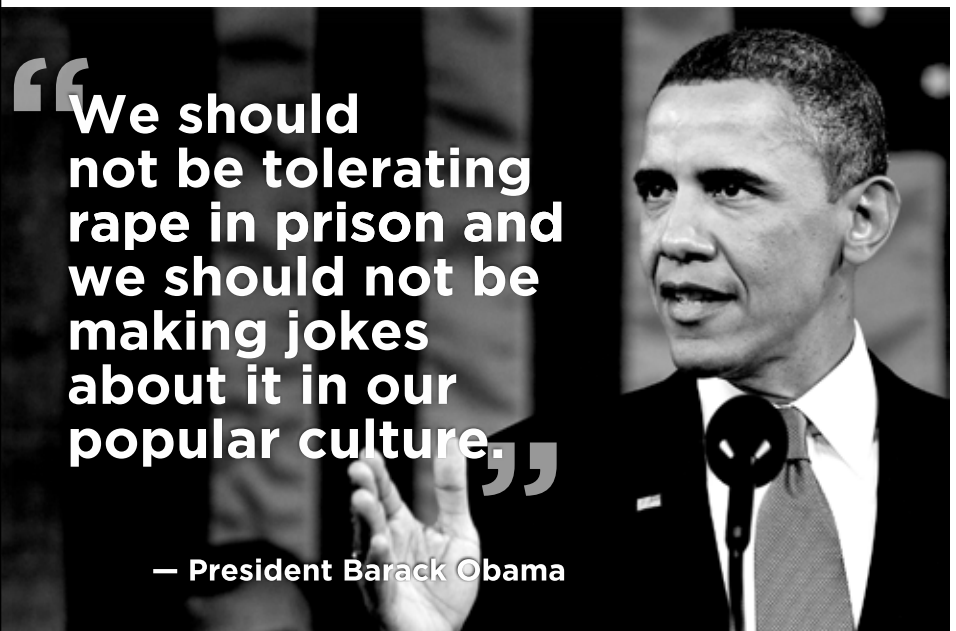
**W**HEN ANDREW LEARNED last year that Indiana had opted out of national standards to end sexual abuse behind bars, he was devastated. Andrew knew better than anyone how badly the state needed strong rules — which were mandated by the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) — to ensure the safety of inmates. Over the previous four years, he had been sexually assaulted multiple times while in an Indiana state prison.

In a letter to JDI, Andrew didn't mince words in criticizing his governor, Mike Pence. "It was shameful of the governor to

reject the PREA standards," he wrote. "I, for one, know that Indiana prisons need PREA big time."

With survivors like Andrew in mind, JDI launched a national campaign targeting Indiana and the handful of other states that opposed PREA, demanding that they change course and do the right thing. One year later, the impact of this advocacy is clear. Two of the six states that rejected PREA in 2014 — Florida and Indiana — reversed their positions; Texas, which had been overtly hostile to PREA, also signaled that it was receptive to its reforms. These states joined 32 others in declaring their intention to follow the PREA

*See 46 and Counting, continued on page 3*



— President Barack Obama

## The Power of Good Data

**A**S A JDI SUPPORTER, chances are that you've signed a petition, called your governor, or written a holiday card to a prisoner rape survivor. Such contributions, combined with the courage of survivors to tell their stories, have helped JDI become the force for positive change that we are today.

But there's another, less known yet immensely important, factor that has also contributed to our success: solid data. Since 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has conducted anonymous surveys with hundreds of thousands of adults and children in U.S. detention facilities. The resulting series of reports has shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that prisoner rape is a nationwide crisis — and has also helped guide our efforts to stop this abuse.

The BJS' most recent survey of adult prisons and jails was completed in 2012, which is also the year of its last survey of youth fa-



*The recent BJS findings on sexual abuse among transgender inmates give a devastatingly clear picture of this country's failure to protect transgender people behind bars.*

cilities. Unfortunately, BJS has no immediate plans to conduct more surveys. The main reason is a lack of funding.

Later this year, JDI will begin pushing Congress to set aside more funds in the next bud-

get so that BJS can continue this pivotal work. In these early years of PREA implementation, we need strong research to show where the standards are working and where they are not; where inmates are safe and where they are not.

## JDI Survivor Council Grows Even Stronger

**I**N AUGUST, JDI's Survivor Council added more expertise and leadership, bringing on board three new members: Kerri Cecil, Pamela Prohoroff, and Maribel Reister. The Council's newest members are based in Southern California, but their commitment to ending prisoner rape extends nationwide, and even globally.

Kerri is a filmmaker and activist promoting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. A transgender woman, Kerri spent 20 years in and out of men's prisons in California, where she was sexually abused repeatedly by staff and inmates. Today, she helps JDI train advocates on how to provide quality services to survivors behind bars. In addition, she is working on a documentary about Los Angeles' transgender community, highlighting its challenges and successes.

Maribel was one of the first-ever PREA peer educators, as part of JDI's trailblazing program at the California Institution for Women. In this role, she helped teach fellow prisoners about their absolute right to be safe from sexual abuse. Sadly, she knew first-hand of the devastating impact of sexual violence. A survivor of staff sexual misconduct, Maribel has continued to speak out against prisoner rape since her release from prison in 2014.

Pamela, who served one year in a California state prison, works as a curriculum developer for the United Nations. She also has years of experience as an international marketing executive. In addition to serving on JDI's Survivor Council, Pamela volunteers with a ministry group that helps inmates at Las Colinas, a jail in San Diego County.



*Maribel Reister, JDI Survivor Council member*

# A New Mindset in South Carolina



© South Carolina Department of Corrections

**R**ECENTLY, ON A humid South Carolina morning, roughly 100 state prison officials gathered in Columbia, the capital, for a training on the PREA standards led by JDI. The goal was not simply to get officials to memorize regulations or to help them pass a PREA audit. Instead, we aimed to show that adopting PREA would help spark a lifesaving shift in the way those working inside prisons think about the people in their custody.

By the end of the training, it was clear that our messages were sinking in. Staff began to see that some of their commonly held beliefs about prisoners — beliefs they had taken for granted for years — were harmful. As one officer put it, “We have to get out of the mindset of ‘He committed a terrible crime, he does not deserve the same rights as everyone else.’ I am part of that mindset. No, change will not happen overnight, but this training is a good start.”

The training was one of many important steps that the South Carolina Department of Corrections (SCDC), with JDI’s help, has taken in the past two years. With support from a federal grant, SCDC and JDI have worked together to revamp the agency’s policies, making sure that they spell out what staff have to do to prevent sexual violence, and to respond appropriately to any prisoner who reports abuse.

SCDC has also put in place a peer education program, where specially selected and trained prisoners have taught more than 3,500 fellow inmates about their rights, and how to stay safe. The success of the program shows that some of the most effective teachers of this material are prisoners themselves — like Arimatia. He said, “When I am able to help other prisoners, it is rewarding. I take great pride in being part of changing the prison culture.”

Much of the credit for the agency’s turnaround belongs to John Barkley, the statewide PREA Coordinator. A corrections veteran with 23 years of experience, John knows that changing the agency’s practices, and especially its culture, will be frustrating at times. But he has never shied away from a challenge. “I truly believe that we can turn SCDC into a system that others look to as a model,” said John. “PREA has given us a roadmap. If we keep following it, we will be able to ensure that every person inside these walls is treated with dignity and kept safe.”

The strides already made by SCDC show that John’s optimism is well-founded. Yet John and other SCDC leaders are also realistic, recognizing that much work remains. “It says a lot that SCDC leaders aren’t stopping at just creating good policies,” said JDI’s Cynthia Totten. “They understand that culture change is tough work that takes a long time. Their level of commitment is going to save lives.”

## 46 and Counting

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standards, according to the Department of Justice’s tally. Eleven governors certified that their state had already put the standards in place, up from just two the previous year.

The widespread, and growing, embrace of PREA is a victory. But the most important measure of PREA’s success is what happens inside prisons, not in governors’ offices. Fortunately, many corrections agencies are proving that their states’ commitment is not an empty promise. Tens of thousands of staff have been trained to prevent sexual abuse. Hundreds of thousands of inmates have been taught about their right to be free from rape. In a growing number of facilities, prisoners are getting free, confidential rape crisis counseling — which was unthinkable a few years ago.

PREA’s rollout is changing — and saving — people’s lives. But although the PREA standards are increasingly seen as the norm among corrections leaders, four states refused to commit to them in 2015: Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, and Utah. Further, even in the 46 PREA-adopting states, many inmates are still not safe.

JDI will continue to push all states to honor the PREA standards. This is particularly important in Texas, which has the most dangerous prisons in the country. Fortunately, Texas’s new governor, Greg Abbott, has distanced himself from his predecessor, Rick Perry, whose cynical campaign to sabotage PREA, in Texas and nationwide, was defeated. But Governor Abbott stopped short of promising to adopt the PREA standards fully; instead, he said that Texas would follow the rules “wherever feasible.”

“It is troubling that the Department of Justice is allowing Governor Abbott the option to ignore provisions that he deems infeasible,” said Lovisa Stannow, JDI’s Executive Director. “No other governor has been granted this choice. PREA is not an à la carte menu. The law’s intent is clear — every provision must be met.”



## “I Know I Can Make It Because I’m a Survivor”

**T**HE MOST POWERFUL weapon in the fight to end prisoner rape is survivor testimony. The courage of survivors to tell their stories has made all of our victories possible, including the passage of the U.S.’s landmark Prison Rape Elimination Act.

It is not only survivors in the U.S. who are making a difference. Thanks to a JDI-South Africa multimedia project, *Digital Stories*, people who were raped in South African prisons are beginning to share their experiences publicly for the first time — and demanding government action.

*Digital Stories* sheds light on the crisis of prisoner rape in South Africa, while also making it clear that this violence is preventable. Take Vincent’s story. When Vincent arrived at prison, it was clear to staff that he was vulnerable. Yet they did not protect him — instead, they taunted him. After sizing up Vincent in the booking area, an officer said to his colleague, “Here is the rubbish.” Their hostility sent a clear message: Vincent was fair game. Later that day, he was raped by one gang member, and then another.

Devastated by the abuse, Vincent sought help from prison officials, doctors, and even a local magistrate. No matter where he turned, his pleas fell on deaf ears. The story of another South African survivor, Francois, follows a similar trajectory. Francois was raped multiple times after staff placed him in a cell with a known sex offender. Despite his suffering, Francois never received any counseling or support.

These survivors chose to tell their stories in the hope that doing so would save others from abuse. In his testimony, Vincent includes a powerful call to action, “To the people who are in the position to give help: listen sensitively, and help people like me report sexual violence so we can live again. To the Department of Correctional Services: stop this from happening.”

JDI-SA will continue to add testimony to the *Digital Stories* project. For many survivors, the simple act of sharing their story can make a world of difference in their healing. This certainly was the case for Vincent, who explained, “I know I can make it because I’m a survivor.”



## Transgender Inmates Must Also Be Safe

**C**ORRECTIONS AGENCIES ALMOST always house transgender people based on their birth gender instead of their gender identity. For example, transgender women — including those who have expressed their female identity for decades — are typically placed in men’s facilities, where they are prime targets for sexual abuse.

JDI has long argued that transgender inmates’ own views on where they would be safest should be paramount in housing decisions. So it came as welcome news when the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) released a new policy in July that calls for, among other things, serious consideration of housing transgender detainees by their gender identity, if they believe that is the safest option. ICE is poised to become the largest corrections agency — and the only federal one — to have such a policy in place.

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