

## ACTION UPDATE

NOVEMBER 2016

**C**RIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM is a topic that seems to be on everyone's mind these days — and rightly so. We lock up too many people for too long in prisons plagued by violence and deprivation.

Yet when people talk about fixing our criminal justice system, something is usually missing. The conversations tend to

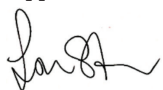


focus on keeping people out of prison and then, if they do get locked up, helping them reenter society once they have served their time. These are noble goals. But what about the more than two

million people who are locked up in the U.S. on any given day? Should we simply forget about them?

Boa Smith was given a life sentence when she was just 21 years old. Prison life was rough, but Boa managed to survive. Through a JDI initiative, she served as a peer educator, teaching fellow inmates about sexual abuse and how to stay safe. And, crucially, the warden at Boa's prison believed that every prisoner — including lifers — deserved to be treated with dignity and to have opportunities to grow.

Boa made parole in 2013, and she is flourishing. I should know: she's now my colleague. Boa made it on the outside because she's smart and resilient, and because she had a warden who cared and who gave her access to lifesaving JDI programs — programs that you, our supporters, make possible.



Lovisa Stannow  
Executive Director

## It's About Leadership

*Juvenile Detention Staff Who Want to Keep Youth Safe Can Do So*

**M**IGUEL FELT AFRAID FROM the moment he stepped foot inside his new home, a juvenile hall in California. The boy he was assigned to live with — an older, stronger teenager with lots of friends in the facility — had a reputation for violence. Just 16 years old, Miguel felt desperate, but he had no one to turn to for help.

Miguel did not dare confide in staff. They treated the kids disrespectfully, or simply ignored them. Whenever fights broke out — and they frequently did at this facility — the officers looked the other way. So Miguel told no one that he was afraid. And after his cellmate raped him, he kept quiet about that, too.

Our juvenile detention system is filled with kids like Miguel. They feel unsafe, but are powerless to speak out. *If only I had someone I could talk to about my safety*, many think. *If only there were someone I could trust — someone who cared.*

With people like Miguel in mind, JDI has long argued that sexual abuse is not an inevitable part of life in youth detention. We believe that facilities with strong leaders and staff who are committed to kids' safety can end this violence. Now we have the hard data to prove it.

In June, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) issued a landmark report on the factors that make a youth detention facility safe. Its

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*It's no mystery why some youth facilities are dangerous and others safe. In safe facilities, staff create a climate of openness and make sure the kids in their custody know their rights.*

# Joe and Morgan at the White House

**J**OE BOOTH AND MORGAN GIVENS EACH plays a vital role in JDI's work to end prisoner rape. Joe serves on our Survivor Council, and Morgan is a Program Officer at our East Coast office.

The two met for the first time at a White House meeting on LGBT and HIV criminal justice issues in September. They were speakers at this historic event, which was organized by a working group — of which JDI is a member — that fights for the safety of LGBT people and people living with HIV.

Joe shared his story about being raped in the government's custody. He had a simple request for the audience of federal officials and fellow advocates: please do a better job keeping inmates safe. As he left the podium, Joe was approached by a Justice Department lawyer who expressed dismay that he had reached out to the Department after his rape but hadn't heard back. The attorney apologized to Joe on behalf of the Department.

"It's amazing to know that because I shared my story, people in our government are more

likely to listen the next time a survivor reaches out to them," said Joe, who was moved to tears. "That's why I'm going to keep telling my story — and why I won't stop telling it until we end prisoner rape."

A former Washington, DC police officer, Morgan works on JDI projects to keep prisoners safe in Virginia and South Carolina and on our new effort to end sexual assault by law enforcement. At the White House event, he talked about his experience on the DC police force. He shared that, as a young officer, he was officially taught to deescalate conflict. At the same time, though, he was told again and again by more experienced officers that part of his job was to use force to assert his authority.

"Officers learn that there is official policy — but that there is also a way that things are actually done. All too often, this meant that superiors on the force wrote off complaints of sexual harassment as 'boys being boys,'" Morgan said. "If we're going to stop police officers from committing these abuses, we need to dig deeply into policing culture and root out these core attitudes in departments nationwide."



Joe (left) and Morgan (right), with JDI Executive Director Lovisa Stannow, at a historic White House meeting on LGBT and HIV criminal justice issues.

## It's About Leadership

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findings are straightforward. Facilities with very low rates of sexual abuse have staff who build trust among youth, and ensure that they know their rights and how to report abuse. In facilities that lack these qualities — like the juvenile hall where Miguel spent time — sexual abuse is widespread.

Simply telling kids that sexual abuse is against the rules has a dramatic impact. Per the BJS, facilities that give kids this basic message within 24 hours of their arrival have rates of staff misconduct that are roughly five times lower than facilities that never provide such information.

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Gaining youth's trust is similarly crucial. The BJS shows that facilities where kids feel comfortable reporting sexual abuse to staff have low rates of this violence. Conversely, when youth have no faith in staff, either because they are afraid of retaliation or don't think they will be taken seriously, sexual abuse thrives.

These findings are decisive, but they did not come as a surprise to advocates. For years, JDI has argued that having staff who are trustworthy and compassionate is important — because that's what survivors have always said to us.

After Miguel told us about his rape, we asked him what would have made a difference. His response was simple: "Staff could have been more caring."

*(Miguel's name has been changed to protect his privacy.)*

# When the Rapist is a Woman



*At Mabel Bassett Correctional Center (above), a women's prison in Oklahoma, more than 15 percent of the inmates reported being sexually assaulted by another inmate in one year.*

**S**HORTLY AFTER HE ARRIVED at a federal prison, Michael was placed in protective custody. The purpose of the move was to keep him safe from gangs — but it wound up making him an easy target for an abuser who worked at the facility. Anytime Michael showered, the officer would leer at him and make degrading comments about his body. Pretty soon, the ongoing verbal abuse began to escalate into something far worse. It started with abusive pat searches and then, one day, the officer raped him.

Michael tried to speak out, but other staff threatened to hurt him. Then they stopped giving him meals. Fearing further retaliation, Michael gave up trying to report. In a letter to JDI, he wrote, “I feel like this is all my fault.” Michael’s story follows a chillingly familiar script. His perpetrator was in a position of authority, and then used that power to compel him to keep quiet. But there’s one major difference that sets apart what happened to Michael from popular accounts of sexual violence: his abuser was a woman.

Although we hardly hear about sexual abuse by women, that does not mean it is rare. In its national inmate surveys, the BJS found that female staff are responsible for more sexual violence than male staff, even though women make up only a third of the

corrections workforce. In juvenile facilities, the gender breakdown of perpetrators is even more lopsided: a staggering 94 percent of youth victims of staff sexual misconduct were abused by a woman. Perhaps even more surprising is the data on sexual abuse committed by prisoners. Per the BJS, the rate of this abuse in women’s facilities is four times higher than it is in men’s facilities.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, many people working in corrections have been slow to respond to the BJS’s revelations and to figure out how to address sexual abuse committed by women. Advocates, too, are often unsettled to learn that so many perpetrators do not fit the profile they expect. And it’s hard not to wonder how many survivors have kept quiet, believing their abuse does not “count” because it was a woman who attacked them.

The issue of women perpetrators has remained in the shadows for far too long. We owe it to Michael — and other survivors like him — to tackle this taboo subject, no matter how challenging it is. In May, JDI held a landmark meeting on this topic, bringing together corrections officials, researchers, advocates, and former prisoners. The gathering helped illuminate some of the reasons sexual abuse by women is so common — and what can be done to stop it.

## We Fought an Unjust Rule — and We Won

**W**E BELIEVE THAT PRISONER rape survivors — just like survivors in the community — have a right to get counseling. Yet a decades-long federal rule blocked rape crisis centers from using Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant money to work with prisoners. One of JDI’s top priorities has been to overturn this unjust rule — and, in August, we finally did it.

The VOCA ban had a devastating impact on survivors. Like Cornelius. A prisoner in Florida, Cornelius has been sexually assaulted behind bars many times. He struggled with anxiety and despair but, like many survivors, did not dare seek help from prison officials, who had failed repeatedly to protect him. So, he decided to write a letter to a nearby rape crisis center.

The counselor who received Cornelius’s letter was an expert in assisting survivors of sexual assault. She could have worked with Cornelius on a plan to stop the spiral of depression and get him back on his feet. This approach was pioneered by advocates, and has helped countless survivors.

Yet when the counselor saw the prison postmark on the letter, her heart sank. She knew that her hands were tied. The VOCA grant money allowed her agency to do lifesaving work, but with strings attached: no services to prisoners.

Years of JDI advocacy led the Department of Justice to recommend in 2013 that the VOCA ban be overturned. This is when JDI supporters stepped in, submitting a flood of public comments in support of letting rape crisis counselors use VOCA funding to work with prisoners. The Department made the change official in August.

This victory will make a difference. Because we fought the rule and won, the next time someone like Cornelius asks for help, dedicated counselors will be able to provide it.



## "This is a Way to Give Back"

*A JDI Program Puts Inmates in Charge of Education on Sexual Abuse — and It's Working*

**W**HEN OSCAR SPEAKS, other inmates listen. "You are either going to lose yourself or find yourself in here. Prison can destroy you, or it can give you a chance to heal and start doing the right thing," he explains. Dazed with fear, the newly arrived prisoners hang on Oscar's every word. He's a verifiably tough guy, golden teeth gleaming, with 22 years in prison behind him.

As one of four inmate peer educators specializing in sexual abuse prevention at South Carolina's Kirkland Correctional Institution, Oscar is busy. Kirkland is the state's reception center, meaning that all inmates pass through here before moving on to the state prison where they will be housed long-term. To keep up, the peer educators hold several classes a day — through a pioneering initiative launched by JDI and the South Carolina Department of Corrections.

The peer educators explain how to get help, what hotline numbers to dial on the prison phones, how to report sexual abuse to staff. They talk through prison policies and clarify what the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards say. They also venture into the murky territory of snitching, of codes of silence, of the unwritten rules that every prisoner needs to know and that only a fellow inmate can properly convey. "Many of the

guys don't understand the difference between snitching and asking for help," says Frank, another of the peer educators. "Sexual abuse is about your health and safety, sexual abuse is personal. Asking for help is not snitching."

At Kirkland, the peer educators have become mentors. When they walk the yard, other inmates seek them out to ask questions about PREA and about prison life. "To me, this is a way to give back, to share what I have learned, to help others avoid what I've been through," says Oscar. Perez, also a peer educator, agrees. "I'm still young so many of the younger inmates can relate to me, and I'm bilingual, so I can help people who only speak Spanish."

Frank has spent 13 years in prison, years that have seen plenty of pain and loss. "I'm doing this work to make up for not being able to be there for my son when he grew up. He was only nine when I was locked up. As prisoners, we have hurt ourselves so much, and we have hurt others. We have hurt our families and communities. For me, doing this work is a way to deal with the pain."

For the rest of the country, they have a message. "Sexual abuse is not cool, it's not right. Everyone needs this knowledge and every prison should have peer educators to talk to other prisoners about PREA and sexual abuse."



JDI staff tour a South Carolina prison with peer educators (left to right) Frank, Perez, and Oscar.

## Give Survivors Your Words of Hope

JDI's WORDS OF HOPE holiday card campaign kicks off in just a few weeks!

As a dedicated JDI supporter, you already know about *Words of Hope*. Every year, you help us deliver thousands of holiday messages to incarcerated survivors nationwide, providing them with compassion during a lonely time.

With the holidays approaching, we wanted you to hear from Roderick, a survivor, about what these cards mean. He told us, "I look forward to the cards every year, because they inspire me with so much hope and bring me so much joy."

To learn more about *Words of Hope*, visit [www.justdetention.org/wordsofhope](http://www.justdetention.org/wordsofhope)

### JUST DETENTION INTERNATIONAL

3325 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 340  
Los Angeles, CA 90010  
Tel: (213) 384-1400  
Fax: (213) 384-1411

East Coast Office  
1900 L Street NW, Suite 601  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: (202) 506-3333  
Fax: (202) 506-7971

JDI-South Africa  
Norwood Place, 2nd Floor  
66 Grant Avenue  
Norwood, Johannesburg 2192  
South Africa  
Tel: +27 (11) 483 0989

[info@justdetention.org](mailto:info@justdetention.org)  
[www.justdetention.org](http://www.justdetention.org)



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