



New York City Alliance  
Against Sexual Assault

April 22, 2019

Members of the Board of the Correction  
1 Centre Street  
Room 2213  
New York, N.Y. 10007

Dear Members of the Board of Correction:

We appreciate the opportunity to bring our concerns around sexual abuse in correction facilities to the Board and hope that this forum will allow us to discuss the need to refine, supplement, and monitor the training of Department of Corrections employees according to PREA standards.

Founded in 2000, The New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault (“the Alliance”) mission is to prevent sexual violence and reduce the harm it causes through education, research and advocacy. The Alliance is a leading voice for supporting survivors of sex crimes and preventing sexual violence.

The Alliance led the fight for the Sexual Assault Reform Act of 2001, the most significant revision of the state’s sexual assault criminal statutes in 30 years. Two years later, the Alliance successfully advocated for the Forensic Payment Act (2003), which revolutionized how forensic exams are paid for in New York State allowing for direct payment by the NYS Office of Victim Services to providing hospitals. Among other early accomplishments was our involvement in the establishment of the “Centers of Excellence” designation to recognize hospitals providing best-practice acute care for sexual assault victims, assisting emergency departments in complying with NYS DOH regulations regarding the provision of quality intervention to survivors of sexual assault.

The Alliance serves as an umbrella organization for rape crisis centers in New York City, providing technical assistance, training, and advocacy to approximately 465 organizations/year statewide, and growing. Our Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Training Institute (SAFETI) offers the 40-hour Basic SAFE Certification Course at least twice a year and is the largest and one of only five NYS Department of Health-certified training programs for Emergency Department and medical professionals in New York State. The Alliance also houses a robust campus program, which currently has formalized partnerships with ten college campuses to which we provide technical assistance, training and support around sexual assault and title IX issues. Since its inception, the Alliance has led 185 workshops reaching over 5,600 students, staff and administrators through programming efforts. Additionally, as part of a Healthy Nightlife initiative, the Alliance partnered with the Crime Victims Treatment Center (CVTC), Mt. Sinai Beth Israel Victim Services Program and Bellevue Rape Crisis Centers to engage nightlife staff directly in efforts to prevent sexual violence in nightlife spaces.

In order to break the cycle of violence it is necessary to provide education, prevention, early identification and intervention, and effective trauma treatment. Based on our extensive experience in

providing trainings pertaining to sexual assault, we would like to offer some recommendations around the current protocols at DOC.

Sexual violence is a crime that does not discriminate, and affects people of all identities and backgrounds, often victimizing those most vulnerable. It is a serious public health, public safety and human rights issue of epidemic proportions, yet it remains one of the most under reported crimes in the U.S – three out of four cases go unreported. One of the most common reasons behind underreporting is shame, self-blame and the stigma attached to sexual assault. Trauma affects the brain in such a way that it is often difficult for the survivor to recall the sequence of events, those missing details often cast doubt about what took place and leads to self-doubt. Victim-blaming is another common obstacle. It is well-established that survivors often don't disclose the abuse for several years after the assault if at all, and often, when they do, survivors don't get the kind of response they hoped for. As a result of these negative interactions, survivors suffer from a variety of detrimental health outcomes such as increased psychological distress, physical health symptomatology and sexual health risk taking behaviors.

In order to address the implications of a sexual assault in terms of the stigma around sexual abuse, the incredibly high risks of reporting an inmate or an officer, the effects of trauma and its long-term sequelae, we would like to propose an additional set of trainings. First, however, we would like to consider how these trainings are implemented. It would be helpful if the Board could ask the following questions of the Department of Corrections:

- Who is providing the trainings?  
Ideally, the trainer would be an independent entity so that there can be open and honest conversations
- Who is receiving the trainings?  
All levels of staff should be receiving the trainings and their attendance tracked so that its clear who is receiving which training
- Is the supervisor training separate from staff?  
This would allow both parties to feel comfortable asking questions and having discussions without the fear of feeling judged or having to deal with consequences
- How frequently are these trainings updated?  
Given the advances in research as well as the changing political climate, it's important to evaluate and update the trainings annually
- At what point along the onboarding process of new staff are the trainings provided?  
These trainings should be early on so that the employees are vigilant and equipped to identify risk factors and symptoms
- How frequently are the trainings offered?  
Frequent trainings would serve as refreshers for staff and allow new employees to receive the training early on when they are hired
- What is the mode of delivery?  
In-person interactive trainings are much more impactful, and the material shared has higher retention probability than those delivered via video
  - Are trainings completed in one session, or multi-dose? Multi-dose trainings are generally more in-depth allowing time for participants to process the information provided

- Are there follow-up options? For subject areas that may not be covered because of time restraints or content that requires deeper understanding, follow-up options such as additional reading material, or online videos can be helpful
- Is there counseling support available for participants in the event that they feel triggered during a training?
 

An individual who may have experienced sexual abuse, harassment or assault may be reminded of it during a training and it's important to ensure that they have support to address those feelings in a safe space
- How is the impact of these trainings evaluated?
 

Some examples of statistics that can be tracked to show progress are: the number of reports made, disciplinary measures taken, and the reduction in number of incidents
- How do you get participants' buy-in other than it being a mandatory training?
 

For any training to be successful it is important for the participants to recognize its pertinence. Consider incentives or ways in which staff would appreciate the need for such training.
- What languages are the trainings available in?
 

If English is not the first language of the participants, it would be helpful to have the trainings provided in other languages as the content is intense and can be triggering for some people; it's imperative to have support for the participants so that they feel comfortable and the training is productive.

While in the process of revising the training curriculum, it would be beneficial to keep the following recommendations in mind:

- All trainings need to be updated with current vernacular and procedures
- Trainings should be provided in-person in the form of interactive sessions
- Staff eligible for trainings should be identified and their participation in training sessions documented
- After each training, action-steps with timelines should be discussed in terms of how to follow through with the information gained and skills learned.
- Concrete measures should be put in place for accountability to check progress

Sexual violence training needs to take a trauma-informed approach because it provides a lens that helps another person gain a better understanding of the survivor's behaviors. A trauma-informed training would allow individuals to be seen as a whole, recognizing how one's life experiences may result in specific behaviors, or how one's past experiences may trigger potential reactions. In correctional facilities particularly, it would allow law enforcement officers to be better prepared. Given the power dynamics between inmates and officials, it's also important to recognize how that might play in to the abuse and/or reporting (in the case of abuse perpetrated by an officer on an inmate). Similarly, the consequences of "telling" on another inmate, or worse, an officer, could possibly result in ongoing abuse or other consequences. Vulnerable populations, often being easier targets, need higher vigilance. A comprehensive trauma-informed training can help correctional officers feel more capable of identifying red flags for sexual abuse, understanding its impact on behavior, and improving the chances of reporting, ultimately with a goal of reducing abuse within the system.

The following is a list of trainings the Alliance has created to complement the list provided on the Department of Corrections website:

- Acknowledging biases and re-thinking stereotypes
- Power and control dynamics within systems
- Providing increased vigilance for vulnerable populations
- Understanding behaviors that may stem from trauma
- Creating a safe environment/space for inmates to disclose abuse
- Steps that can be taken to minimize retriggering assault survivors
- Bystander training
  - Creating a safe environment for intervention
- Legal procedure and ramifications of reporting
- Effects of non-reporting on a victim
- Being mindful when working with survivors (language, physical touch, for example: pat downs and body searches)
  - De-escalating situations between inmates using a trauma-informed approach
- Supervisor training to support staff while holding individuals accountable
- Vicarious trauma
  - Address high burnout and turnover rates along with job satisfaction

If correction officers were given appropriate information about sexual abuse through comprehensive training, they would feel more equipped to provide adequate support to incarcerated survivors, and we may eventually be able to stop the cycle of abuse within the system while creating an environment where there is no tolerance for sexual abuse.

We hope that the information provided here will help the Board of Corrections in their work in ensuring that incarcerated survivors receive the highest level of care such that they have a safe space to address the trauma and begin their journey toward healing.

Thank you for your time and attention to the matter.

Sincerely,

Sara Zaidi  
Assistant Director of Intervention Programs  
On behalf of the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault