

# LETTER CORRESPONDENCE WITH INCARCERATED SURVIVORS

Letter correspondence with incarcerated survivors plays an important role in advocacy and ongoing emotional support. It is one of the most confidential ways that survivors can communicate with your agency about their needs. To encourage ongoing communication with survivors behind bars, here are a few steps to take when reading and responding to letters from survivors behind bars.

## TAKE A SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH

Maintaining a survivor-centered approach means an investment in earning the survivor's trust by leaving assumptions behind, acknowledging that the survivor is the expert in their journey, and offering options, rather than making decisions for them. This also looks like identifying, acknowledging, and challenging personal biases about incarcerated survivors.

## READ THE LETTER MORE THAN ONCE TO ASSESS THE NEEDS OF THE SURVIVOR

- Assess their current level of safety and crisis.
- Determine the type of abuse they are describing (child sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse in detention).

## IDENTIFY A STRUCTURE FOR THE LETTER TO ENSURE A HOLISTIC RESPONSE

- Determine what kind of support the survivor are asking for.
- Describe the type of support and resources your agency can provide.
- Offer relevant outside referrals, as needed.
- Ask about their personal approaches to safety planning, coping mechanisms, and self-care.
- Offer approaches that would be relevant to their experience being incarcerated.
- Explain their reporting options, if applicable.
- Include validation and emotional support throughout your response.
- Always thank the survivor for writing to you.

## ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS, IF NECESSARY

- For example, are you experiencing ongoing abuse and harassment?
- Did the abuse occur at the facility where you are currently being held or somewhere else?
- Is the person hurting you a fellow incarcerated person or a staff/volunteer?
- Is the person hurting you in your housing unit or cell?
- When asking clarifying questions, mirror the language they use to describe their experiences with abuse and/or harassment

## BUILD RAPPORT WITH THE SURVIVOR IN ORDER TO PROVIDE ONGOING CARE

- Treat a letter the same way you would a hotline call or a 1:1 session.
- If your agency is unable to provide in person support, ongoing care through letters is incredibly important to establish.
- Always include a question in your response, to encourage ongoing communication.
- End your letter in a way that encourages a response, "Keep in touch," "I look forward to hearing from you again," "Let me know if there's any other way I can support you through your healing journey."

This hand out serves as a tip sheet, **after** participating in training and watching webinars that provide more detailed technical assistance. This is not an exhaustive list of tips. Make sure to consult with JDI and/or ValorUS if you have specific questions about how to respond to a letter.

# LETTER CORRESPONDENCE

## PRACTICING CARE AND SETTING BOUNDARIES

As you begin to provide your clients with ongoing support via letter correspondence, you'll want to continue setting clear boundaries. Because advocacy is a helping profession, advocates often find it imperative to balance personal and professional boundaries with their clients.

### PROFESSIONAL VS. PERSONAL

Professional relationships are often time bound, have distinct roles and responsibilities, and have some structure. As an advocate you'll have the opportunity to maintain the boundaries that guide the advocate-client relationship. Doing so, will hopefully allow your client to learn how to mirror your boundary setting with you and others.

### FOCUS ON HEALING AND RECOVERY

Although your client may not always explicitly focus on the abuse or harassment they've experienced, they may focus on other topics related to their recovery and healing. Co-creating flexible goals with your client from the beginning can help you stay on track. Acknowledge and celebrate when goals have been met and when new goals have been created organically.

### PRACTICE SELF AWARENESS

Be cautious about disclosing personal stories as a way to connect with your client or to illustrate a specific point. If you notice yourself slipping and your boundaries have changed, ask yourself, "What's changed? Consider "What is the situation eliciting that's making me overstep my boundaries?" Then, mull over your options: "What am I going to do about the situation? What do I have control over?"<sup>1</sup>

### AVOID DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

You should hold one type of relationship with a client. Because you may discuss personal, traumatic, and abusive experiences in their life, it's important to maintain the advocate-client relationship.

## STAY WITHIN YOUR SCOPE OF WORK

Maintain consistent, fair, and firm boundaries. Clients may ask you to mail letters or contact others and you'll need to effectively communicate when you're unable to. It's important that you express the limitations of your role as an advocate and be transparent about the way your advocacy may not always have the intended results. If you find yourself unsure of how to respond to certain questions or experiences, seek further support for yourself or your clients.

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