

Supporting Survivors with a History of Incarceration: Interview with Nicole Hamilton-Brahm Crisis Intervention Service

[Kaitlin Kall](#) of the Vera Institute of Justice and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims spoke with Nicole Hamilton-Brahm, Violent Crimes Program Supervisor at [Crisis Intervention Service](#) (CIS). CIS is a victim services agency that serves 15 rural counties in North Central Iowa. They provide comprehensive services to survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, human trafficking, homicide, and other violent crimes. Nicole provides victim services and advocacy to currently and formerly incarcerated people, as well as other communities of survivors.

CIS has made an intentional effort to serve survivors with incarceration histories. How do these survivors know that they can come to your organization for assistance?

They learn about our services from many different places. The nearby halfway house has our information and makes its clients aware of our services, and we get referrals from there. Probation and Parole are also aware of our work and make referrals. The county jail will call us if they have someone who is just arrested on a charge but identifies themselves as a victim, and we will meet with this person in the jail. I've gotten to know law enforcement through my previous work as a [SART \(Sexual Assault Response Team\)](#) Coordinator. Through my trainings for law enforcement, I've informed them that victims of crime who have their needs met are a lot more likely to stay involved in the criminal justice process, so law enforcement see the value of our advocacy work. Due to my work with human trafficking victims, law enforcement will now call me if they make a prostitution arrest and I will meet with the person arrested in private to offer our services.

In our society, we often use the labels of “victim” and “offender” as mutually exclusive identities, even though many Americans have experienced both incarceration and violence. Do some of your partners working in the criminal justice system, such as probation and parole officers, have difficulty seeing their clients as “victims”?

Some do; some don't. But even those who are hesitant can see the usefulness in what we do. Sometimes when we discuss victims with justice-involvement, people who work

in the system think we are asking them to give those people a pass. But that doesn't actually have anything to do with what we're asking – we're asking to be allowed to help people with what they need to be safe and to heal.

How do you approach serving survivors who are formerly incarcerated?

I consider formerly incarcerated survivors as its own community, and this work requires strategic planning just like you would do for another cultural group. We offer these survivors emotional support, access to other services, and a lot of advocacy, just like we do with any other population. But I've noticed that a lot of people who have been incarcerated feel beat down. In prison, people are stripped of their identities and reduced to a number; you are literally referred to as a number instead of your name. With the shame and guilt of this experience, it can be hard for people to make a new start. Having an advocate and an ally can really help. My message to these clients is not, "Come into my office and let me help you." It's, "How can I walk with you in this journey to be out of jail or prison and get you to where you need to be? And if I can't help you get what you need, let's find someone who can."

There are many victim service providers who have not intentionally thought about serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated survivors. Why do you think it's important that service providers make efforts to reach this community?

If victim service agencies like ours across the country really want to eradicate violence, we can't pick and choose who we assist. We have to start with the population with the *most* barriers and work our way up. It can be hard to serve incarcerated and formerly incarcerated survivors because they have a lot of needs, but if we can start with the people who have the *least* and help them make changes, this will only improve our work with people who have less barriers.

To learn more about the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims and other available resources, please contact reachingvictims@vera.org.