

Introduction:

Discussing Intimate Violence and Accessing Support (DIVAS) is a program of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. DIVAS provides survivor-centered advocacy, support, and education to individuals who are detained or incarcerated at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (CRCF). Through our partner agency, Women's Freedom Center, we also offer groups at the Tapestry Program in Brattleboro.

DIVAS program includes:

- Individual and group advocacy and education about domestic and sexual violence;
- Service coordination, planning, and support from the time of individuals' incarceration to the time of their release;
- Training and technical assistance for service providers about issues of domestic and sexual violence experienced by people involved in criminal justice and corrections systems.

National data: (*Source: U.S. Department of Justice - Bureau of Justice Statistics*)

- Seventy-five percent (75%) of women in prison are survivors of domestic violence and have histories of severe physical abuse by an intimate partner during adulthood.
- Instances of domestic violence increase to eighty percent (80%) for inmates who report history of mental health issues.
- Eighty-two percent (82%) of women in prison suffered serious physical or sexual abuse during childhood.

DIVAS data:

- During fiscal year 2016, DIVAS program served 435 incarcerated survivors of domestic and sexual violence.
- Ninety-seven percent (97%) of individuals who attended a CRCF mandatory weekly orientation session later attended at least one DIVAS activity.
- Individuals who participated in DIVAS programming report much better overall outcomes in the areas of:
 - Knowledge and understanding of domestic and sexual violence and how these experiences have impacted their lives;
 - Knowledge of strategies to cope with trauma triggers;
 - Ability to safety plan for their release;
 - Ability to identify, connect and build CRCF and community-based support systems and networks.

Participants' feedback:

- "After groups when everyone's tears dry up we feel cleansed and united. We know we are not alone."
- " I needed to address my trauma instead of run[ning] from it and this decision [to participate in DIVAS programming] turned out to be life changing."
- "Things tend to be more difficult when you have a history of violent charges."
- "[I have learned that] I don't have to go back to him."

Challenges faced by criminal justice-involved individuals

If we are talking about supporting the “last Vermonter” to move ahead, we can attest to the fact that many individuals who reside at CRCF are those last Vermonters. We trust that our justice system is doing its job to hold individuals accountable for their transgressions. However, human lives and experiences are complex; therefore, as a community we have an obligation to align our systems of care (e.g. Health Care, Education, Economic Development, Social Services sector, Government) in order to provide coordinated community response and assistance for said individuals. As with many low-income Vermonters, individuals we serve face severe economic instability.

- **Homelessness and lack of stable, affordable housing** – in many instances individuals who are incarcerated face a lack of stable and affordable housing upon release. Individuals are routinely faced with the decision to max out their sentences and remain in prison due to lack of appropriate housing.
- **Wraparound and long-term services from incarceration to community** –
 - Transitional Housing:
 - Poor understanding of trauma-informed practices (including responses to sexual and domestic violence) in transitional housing options;
 - Not enough transitional housing to meet the needs of incarcerated women with dual diagnoses and co-occurring disorders;
 - Many transitional housing options have strict rules that, if broken, can lead to re-incarceration and loss of placement in such programs.
- **Access to mental health and substance use treatment and services** –
 - Lack of therapeutic mental health interventions within CRCF to support incarcerated survivors in dealing with trauma.
 - Hospitalization and round-the-clock mental health care may be more suitable and humane than incarceration in many instances.
 - Responses to complex trauma are often criminalized and the mental health needs of incarcerated survivors risk further deterioration as a result of the facility environment and separation from any community care or support.

We thank you for your support and leadership. If you have any questions or would like to get more information please do not hesitate to contact us.