

Three Formerly Incarcerated Women Talk about Reentry

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Introduction

In June 2013, the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women (Philadelphia, PA) conducted a webinar about reentry featuring three formerly incarcerated women: Brenda Clubine, Mary Heinen, and Antoinette Johnson. During the webinar, all three women shared their experiences about their own reentry process. They also discussed what they have learned from working with other returning survivors and offered suggestions for advocates and other practitioners who are working with previously incarcerated survivors.

All three of these women are survivors of battering and of incarceration. Each one of them is an activist and has devoted her professional life to providing advocacy for charged, incarcerated, and reentering victims of battering.

- **Ms. Brenda Clubine** served 26 years in a California State Prison and is the Founder and Executive Director of [*Every 9 Seconds*](#), a non-profit that advocates for incarcerated survivors.
- **Ms. Mary Heinen**, a longtime prison right's activist, served 27 years in a Michigan State Prison. Mary has worked — and continues to work — on numerous projects for survivors and returning people.
- **Ms. Antoinette Johnson** spent 7 years in prison and serves as a consultant to the Kentucky Coalition Against Domestic Violence (formerly known as the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association) and is a member of their *Formerly Incarcerated Women's Speaker's Bureau*.

The actual webinar was held on June 19, 2013 and was titled *Formerly Incarcerated Women Talk about Reentry*. You can access the webinar from www.ncdbw.org (go to 'resources' and then 'webinars,' and then 'reentry series recordings').

Staff Attorney Quetita Cavero held three preparatory sessions with the speakers prior to the webinar. We wish we had been able to record those sessions in addition to the actual webinar because the speakers shared so much great information each time they spoke.

The responses to the questions below are compiled from combining the information shared during the preparatory sessions and the actual webinar.



Since you each have a different background, maybe it would be helpful to know a little bit about when you went to prison and how long you served. And then, could you talk about what you found to be helpful as you were first negotiating being on the outside again?

Brenda: I was 20 years old when I went into prison and I was 47 when I got out on October 22, 2008. I found that when first coming out, it is critical to have key people who can physically go with you to appointments and to help you figure out how to reacclimatize to everyday living. It can be a close friend, relative or an advocate. Anyone who can offer hands-on guidance — especially to those who are returning after a long time inside — is so needed. It's very important that reentering women have a mentoring team, people there to support them.

For a reentering survivor, having an advocate who can check in with her and explain things to her can be very helpful, particularly if the woman is also experiencing issues of trauma. There's so much basic navigating to relearn that having this kind of support matters a lot. The simplest of tasks can be overwhelming. Things that you'd think anyone would know how to do — like how to get a driver's license — can be so challenging. And when you come out, you really have nothing. At 47, I came out wearing a hoodie with no money in my pockets.

Mary: When I went in it was 1975, the end of the Vietnam War, and I wasn't released until after 9/11. It was devastating coming out having spent decades behind bars. I experienced immediate Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when I was released. No one warned me that might happen, nor have I found anything in books to help explain what happened to me. I'll never forget it; I was out probably just a few days and I was at my sister's home. I had never been there before, since when I went into prison we were just kids. I remember stumbling in her backyard while everyone else was inside having a party. All of a sudden waves of grief, stress, relief, and agony came over me. I cried and cried and couldn't stop crying for about a week. For many of us it was impossible to stop crying for a long time. While it is a relief to have your life back, it really difficult not to think: but now what?

For some time after being released, as part of the PTSD I experienced, I saw the faces of the people I was locked-up with on the faces of random people who passed me by. I was so disoriented. Another thing people don't talk about is the sleep deprivation you've had while incarcerated, and the patterns of sleep disruption you continue to have. Navigating through life, you have to completely re-orient yourself. Basically, what's happened is that you've lost your internal compass to navigate — not just physically — but physiologically and emotionally.

The one thing that really helped me is that, upon release, my dying mother opened her home to me. It was a safe place for me to be and for me to gather the pieces of my life back together. Having that safe place was critical for me. Securing safe housing is critical for anyone to have a successful reentry.

I would agree with Brenda that it is really helpful to have someone closely support you. It is great to have a mentor who can help you as you are starting over. For example, when I was released, I immediately needed to be medically triaged. Upon release, they only give you about one month's worth of medication. And I found that getting medical attention was incredibly challenging. I didn't have medical records nor did I have a primary care physician. The doctors who assisted me wanted

to know why I didn't have these records and wanted to know why I had been in prison. One doctor refused to treat me. Also, medications themselves were so expensive. I had to pay \$77 for a month's worth of my heart medication. Having someone go with me during those times when I was dealing with all of those difficulties was invaluable.

I will say that there can also be a downside of having close assistance. What sometimes ends up happening is that those who help you then may have unrealistic expectations of you. Some may even want to use you. When that happens, it is something one needs to learn how to balance — since you do feel conflicted about what to do. On one hand, you are grateful when you are supported and you want please the ones that have helped you. On the other hand, what they are asking from you may not be what you want to do. It is then learning how to define and establish these boundaries for yourself.

I would also say that there was so much re-learning and learning of things for the first time. Coming back twenty-five years after I first went in, the whole world had changed. Places didn't look the same from when I last saw them. I had to relearn so much from how to spend money to how to navigate day-to-day life.

Brenda: You're really starting over and having to learn some things for the first time like technology. When I first got out, I was handed a cell phone to call my son and had no clue how to use it; I didn't even know how to dial out on it! When I was talking on the cell phone, I didn't realize that I didn't need to hold it in front of my mouth like a walkie-talkie, and that I could listen and speak at the same time. That may seem funny to people but we didn't have that type of technology. Cell phones were the size of shoeboxes when I went to prison.

Also, if a woman is returning after a long time she probably won't have many options. Some people will sense she is extremely vulnerable and try to take advantage of and control her. Coming out after incarceration can be a very vulnerable time for women in general, but it's particularly true for survivors who have a history of being controlled. Often we see that those who want to exploit returning women may, at first, seem to be really helpful and kind. For example, they might offer her something that will make her feel good, like paying for a manicure or giving her some other superficial incentive, only to later make demands on her saying, "This is what you have to do for me now." So, part of accepting help is being cautious of the motives of someone who is helping you.

There have been many very overwhelming moments for me since being out. My biggest thing was that I recognized that I had changed and my feelings and perceptions had changed. People who had been in my life before I went to prison were also not in the same places in their lives. I was still trying to relate to them as I had in the past, and realizing that they had changed so much ended up being very overwhelming for me. It was a lot to deal with.

Antoinette: I was in 7 years, 3 months, and 2 days. One thing I found helpful as I returned was hearing other women talk who were in similar situations as me in terms of having served time for a conviction connected to their experiences of domestic violence. But, really, it was helpful to connect with anyone who had been incarcerated for any charges and got out and were turning their lives around, doing positive things, and giving back to the community. It was very helpful to listen to their experiences and hear about their successes and the barriers that they faced and overcame. Connecting with these women uplifted me and empowered me to want to do positive things. I knew that I could turn something that was negative for me it into a positive. I didn't have to keep playing the hand I was dealt. Instead, I could change it for myself.

The other thing that was really helpful to me was having support both of family and of others. That is why I find the Coaching Project that we have at the Kentucky Coalition Against Domestic Violence (KCADV) to be really effective. The program features connecting a woman as she is returning with a coach mentor who can go with her to various places if she needs support negotiating the different systems in their life. The mentors can be particularly helpful to women who have been in prison for a long time.

Was there anything that was particularly difficult to adjust to once you were back in the community?

Antoinette: Since I served a shorter sentence relative to the other women on this panel, there were a lot of things I already knew about — like computers and cell phones. I knew how to write a résumé, and what to wear on an interview. I didn't need to learn those things. I understood how those things worked. For me, it was the simple things like the language differences between those on the inside and on the outside that I had to readjust to, or how to shift out of practices that became ingrained in me during my time inside. I'll give you an example of this. When I was incarcerated, every time we took a shower each of us had to wear what we called "shower shoes" which were like plastic flip flops. Once I was outside, I would continue to wear shower shoes every time I took a shower. It didn't even occur to me not to; it was so ingrained in me to wear them. And remember, I served a relatively short period of time compared to some women. One day, someone remarked to me, "Why are you wearing those flip flops into the shower?" I just responded without thinking, "They're my shower shoes." The woman who asked didn't know what I was talking about, and it hit me at that moment that this isn't something that other people did! I had been so used to it, that I didn't even realize it was not usual.

After I was released I would carry around a roll of toilet paper in my house, because that is what we did when I was on the inside. That's another example of these prison behaviors that I couldn't shift away from easily. When you're on the inside, you're given 5 rolls of toilet paper that supposed to last you a month, so you carry yours back and forth from your room to the bathroom with you. You don't want to leave it in the bathroom and have somebody use it and then not have enough. I was home and free, and my mom would ask where the toilet paper was and I'd realize that I took it with me. I would be doing things like that without even noticing. Those practices that were so part of my everyday life when I was serving time that it was very hard for me to stop doing them.

The other thing I would say was difficult is that family and friends wanted to take me out shopping and to go out to eat at restaurants. It was so thoughtful of them and I knew they meant well. But, even though I was in for a relatively short time compared to others, being around a lot of people all at once was overwhelming to me. For example, going to Walmart where there were so many people and so many products was just too much at once. I really needed to do those things in baby steps. Sometimes connecting and re-connecting with family and friends takes time, too. You know them, but also, not really anymore. Time has passed so you need to get reacquainted.

Mary: Yes, those day-to-day adjustments were also very difficult for me, too. The world I knew when I first went in was dramatically different than the one I returned to; nothing looked the same. After I returned I went through a grieving process. I didn't understand this is what was happening until much later. I was grieving the loss of who I was and was no longer; all of what I knew was gone, the places, the way things were, and the people who were no longer there. I also was grieving

the loss of friends from prison, those who had become my family, and those that had become part of my everyday life. You grieve the loss of so much; the losses are devastating.

Brenda: I would agree with what both Antoinette and Mary said. The grieving that you do is overwhelming. Grieving about so many lost relationships, including the friends that you left behind is so hard. I think I cried for the first year; I had so many emotions. I believe many people think one can easily say, “I’m out and I’m free,” and we just move on with our lives, and can forget the others who are still inside. Grieving the friends that you left behind is huge. That’s part of the reason why I still fight so hard for incarcerated survivors. I’ve not been able to just say, “I’m out, I’m free,” and leave everything behind and close that door. And people will say, “Forget about it, and move forward.” I cannot. Many cannot. Not forgetting about it is part of the reason why so many of us do the work we do. We have to support each other, particularly as we come out. I had five core people who helped me as I was adjusting back. Without them, I would have never made it on the outside.

What do you think advocates and other practitioners need to know about the trauma a woman may have experienced before incarceration?

Antoinette: I realized that some women in prison who have experienced domestic violence may have never spoken about it before they incarcerated. Depending on her culture and background she may not even have viewed it as abuse or identified the behaviors and dynamics of power and control over her as domestic violence. She might see it just a regular “head of the household” thing, that he’s the provider and controls the finances and everything else.

Mary: In the 1960s and 1970s, domestic violence was something that people didn’t talk about or tell anyone if it was happening. It was a private family matter. Advocates may need to know that it still may be difficult for some women to disclose, or she may never have talked about it before being incarcerated. The woman may have endured abuse since she was a child, and that she may still not be able to talk about it. There are generations of women who were, and are still, incarcerated for whom domestic violence was such a taboo subject. Many of these women who were never able to talk about it, might be serving long sentences, or may not have had their histories of abuse presented or considered by the courts. Back then there was no understanding of domestic violence in the courts — so it may never have been part of her criminal defense.

Brenda: I would agree with that. So many survivors that I met over the years never talked about their history of abuse before coming into the prison.

What might an advocate need to know about trauma during incarceration? And about after incarceration?

Mary: Both during and after incarceration, a survivor might be experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and also institutional trauma from the experiences of being incarcerated, too. For example, she may have been sexually assaulted while incarcerated over decades. You hear story after story. The “shake downs,” feeling devastated as a human being of being molested, and often feeling silenced. What happens is that there is a compounding of trauma. An advocate working with her might need to know that her experiences are not just from before coming into the facility, but they might be continuing during her time in prison and even after she is released. She may not have dealt with any of the trauma. The overwhelming feelings can come in waves and

remembrances. Advocates can, at times, join in her healing as she experiences complicated grief and healing.

Having PTSD when you reintegrate can really impact your ability to transition back. It is already challenging enough for all who are returning, but experiencing these compounding traumas may mean that a woman may be coping with additional underlying challenges.

Antoinette: Even if an incarcerated woman is working with an advocate, the woman may still not feel safe disclosing or telling that advocate about abuse that is currently happening. Some of the ladies who are abused while they are inside don't feel like they can tell. Some think it must not be abuse, telling themselves, "I'm in a woman's prison and abuse doesn't happen between women," or they may have participated in anti-domestic violence education groups and have learned about the dynamics of domestic violence and think, "I should have known better." Advocates need to understand that the women may know what they are experiencing is abuse and want to address it, but may be beating themselves up about it for repeating patterns. Advocates need to know that it may take a lot of time to build trust with the woman before she will be willing to share what's going on.

Brenda: Women who are survivors — even if it's been a long time since they have experienced abuse — may continue to have trauma from their experiences from years ago. It's important for advocates to understand that. Trauma isn't something that goes away, particularly if the survivor herself doesn't talk about it or discuss it. An advocate may need to know that even though there was a large gap of time since she experienced domestic violence, it can still surface for her and she may also have PTSD. Also, even though it may have been a long time since the woman last experienced abuse, it would most likely be helpful for her to have counseling available to her.

Another thing an advocate might want to know is that once a woman knows or gets a sense that she will be released a woman then might be overcome with a lot of new fears — many that might not make any sense. For example, I was afraid to tell anyone that I thought I was getting out because I thought somehow sharing that information would make people jealous and would lead to retaliation from others which would jeopardize my release. There was really no basis for me thinking that at all.

What do you think could help inform an advocate or practitioner who is working with returning women who have experienced abuse as an adult?

Mary: I think it's helpful if someone who will be working with someone who has experienced abuse as an adult to understand how to identify survivors of trauma and screen for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). If an advocate is doing a group at the jail or prison, having a working knowledge about various trauma-informed curricula like Seeking Safety,¹ for example, is important. Also understanding the limitations of trauma and treatment curricula is also important to be able to decide which curriculum would be best to use if they will be conducting a group in the jail or prison.

Brenda: When a woman is returning to the community where her abuser or abuser's family is, an advocate may need to be aware that the woman has to face how the their surviving family perceives

¹ For more information about *Seeking Safety*, please visit: <http://www.treatment-innovations.org/seeking-safety.html>

her, judgment around what happened, and her own level of feeling safe in the community. Safety is a huge issue. She may not have felt safe before going inside, while she was inside, or now that she is back. There may need to be additional safety planning, and an advocate can help a woman navigate her options and create a safety plan with her. Sometimes, it's really helpful, if possible, if she can change the county where she is doing her probation and parole.

It would also be helpful for advocates to be aware and understand that many survivors return to an abusive relationship where the partner may have her participating in illegal activities that could get her back inside if she is on probation and/or parole, and the abuser will use that to try to exploit and control her again.

Antoinette: It would be helpful for an advocate to understand that a woman might have difficulty connecting with others when first adjusting to living outside a prison setting. Perhaps she may seem like she is disconnected or behaving unusually. If an advocate notices that, she may want to ask the woman what could be helpful to support her.

Another thing I think could help inform an advocate who is working with a returning survivor is having an understanding that the returning woman might be experiencing an inner struggle. What I mean by that is that people who have never been incarcerated before think everything is okay now because “you’re out” and should be happy and all the past is over — but that is not the case. You are still dealing with PTSD and all those experiences of trauma. So many advocates or even people in the woman’s life don’t understand that being a survivor can mean that there are different layers of experiences and ways of processing them. Although it is great to be out, the underlying issues are still there. Returning women are hungry for information, and that is genuine. Remember that they are also experiencing an inner struggle, learning everything again and getting reintegrated, it’s not always happy or easy.

Are there interventions or services that are particularly helpful to address these traumas for reentering citizens?

Brenda: As we were saying, women who are survivors, even when it has been a long time since they have experienced abuse, continue to have issues around their trauma and history of abuse. These women don’t necessarily have a place to go that offers specialized trauma counseling for DV survivors. Some programs only work with women who are experiencing current abuse, but for reentering woman it may have been some time since she was abused, but often she is still dealing with the trauma of abuse. Offering those kinds of services to returning women could help her begin to address and heal from some of those past experiences of abuse.

Another helpful intervention is peer support groups. Having other formerly incarcerated women who have been through a similar experience can be invaluable. This is particularly true when family and friends are non-existent or “don’t get it” or when women are returning to communities where their abuser lives. As Antoinette said, people think you should be happy that you’re out, and yes, you are, but people don’t understand that you are struggling with how to move forward. Having peers to talk with is so valuable. Advocates and practitioners could be really helpful if they offered these kinds of opportunities for reentering women to connect with each other.

Antoinette: Starting reentry work while still inside is also a great intervention. An example of this is having women come from the outside to talk to the women inside to share experiences and give insight especially if they also have experience with trauma.

Once she is out, knowing that the local DV program will work with returning survivors, and knowing that she won't be turned away from services because she has a criminal history, is helpful. Also knowing what the local resources are that address trauma, what programs are available, what are the requirements for enrollment, how to connect to these programs — all of this is helpful.

When advocates to connect with other community organizations to build relationships and collaborate, when they go into the jail with to meet with women — that can make all this work a lot smoother and easier for both the advocate and the woman. By working and connecting with other organizations, there can be a linkage between the various community organizations. In working together, there is often a realization that other organizations, that are not anti-DV organizations, are working with people experiencing DV and other issues that are important to survivors. In this collaboration process there is often education around DV.

As a returning survivor, one intervention that was helpful to me in working through the process of transitioning back was involvement in the Kentucky Coalition Against Domestic Violence retreats. I was able to use the time at the retreat to work through some issues, and the bonding with the other woman was so powerful. Knowing that the other participating women often had such similar feelings and experiences as me was at times overwhelming. The women share stories and you also re-connect with fellow prisoners — women who were inside with you. You share things like worries, accomplishments, and fears. At the retreat, we learned about other information in workshops like what our rights were once we were released. For example, I heard a woman talk about her being able to vote even with a conviction, and I didn't realize that was even an option once you were convicted of a crime.

Mary: What many people don't realize is that while women are on the inside is that there is a strong oral tradition among the women. Women talk and talk and talk and talk and share story after story after story. You speak, you share, and you inform each other. When you come outside it is all about technology and everything moves so fast. When an advocate is working with a reentering woman, she might want to know that many returning women talk and talk and talk, basically talk your ear off, so listening is really important. If you listen, they will tell you exactly what they need.

So in terms of interventions, I would also say peer group support is an incredibly powerful intervention and tool for healing. There is so much storytelling, sharing, and the interactions are relational. That is how women cope and what gives them strength are the relationships with other women inside. When a woman leaves, she loses those strong bonds, so there is so much value in connecting with other formerly incarcerated women; continuing oral traditions. An advocate should know that for those of us who were locked up and are now out, many of us have lost all our support, all our friends, our family. Peer support is critical.

What was particularly helpful or unhelpful as you returned back to the community?

Antoinette: I agree with Mary. I would stress that what was really helpful to me was being able to hear other women who were similarly situated, had been there as I had been. We didn't need to

talk about the charges or even anything about the incident for which we were convicted. Rather, it was to listen to their experiences and struggles and successes and it would uplift and give encouragement to me when I would face barriers, frustrations, and recall the advice I had heard.

Brenda: For me, as a survivor, it was important for me to spread my wings in the sense that I was able to make my own choices, make my own boundaries, that I could take responsibility for the consequences of my decisions, good and bad. Sometimes, even really well-intentioned people can start to hover over you and can be insistent on the ways you should do things. That ended up not only being overwhelming, but I started to feel the same controlling dynamic happening as was when I was in prison. It was important that people not hover over me. People were trying to take care of everything, and I was kind of beginning to feel like I was almost still incarcerated. I needed to be able to make my own decision set my own boundaries and feel good about those accomplishments as I did each one of them.

What helps survivors have a more successful reentry? What creates additional barriers or risks?

Mary: I think the top three needs for survivors to have a more successful reentry are housing, employment, and medical care. Finding safe affordable housing is hard for everyone, but there could be other risks involved for survivors. Employment issues are also huge; some things are helpful to know from the very beginning even before starting the job search like knowing how to network and where to network, what to say in interviews, particularly when strategizing about how to address a felony conviction. Medical care is also a big issue many women who are being released are in need of emergency care when they come out. Returning women need to know how to connect to services and also about medical care coverage through the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare.

For me, one of the most important things was getting a job. I needed a job. You have to remember that all those years while you are incarcerated, you don't earn a real income or collect social security. I didn't have money. I got my first job when I was out at a grocery store and I just happened to overhear how someone just got fired. I approached the manager and told him that I needed a job and that I lived across the street and if he hired me that I would be the best worker he had. I had to fill out an application and there was a space where I had to say that I was convicted and I checked "yes." I still got the job, and learned later that my employer got a \$7K tax break for hiring me. It was the perfect job for me as I was just getting back. I loved the smell of bread and of flowers, and it was a job where I felt I could enter at my own pace. But the reality is that as returning people, we are poor people. Even now — years later — I struggle to get a job. I was turned down for three jobs even this week. An advocate can help a woman plan and be a support to her.

Antoinette: Yes, I would agree with Mary about those three areas. Not having good access to medical care or even being able to access medical care at all is something that many returning women might struggle with. Housing is something that many survivors struggle with getting. Since there aren't a lot of options depending on the type of conviction she might have, or she has little to no credit, or no good references, we see "slumlords" take advantage of that. Women may have to live in unsafe or unkempt housing out of necessity until they are able to build credit and a new history of residence. With employment, not knowing who hires "convicted felons" can set someone up for continual disappointment with denials from employers. Even returning women who have

gotten hired may not know how to advance from their current position and often have to overcome attitudes about being convicted within the place they are employed.

I would also add that one thing that can be challenging is being on probation or parole versus being unsupervised. Having someone monitor you often feels controlling, and for a survivor, that can bring up some of those past traumas. In general, it so can be helpful to know what your rights are and how one can minimize barriers and be proactive.

Also, having support and encouragement, having a cheerleader on your side are all helpful things. For women returning, I'd say put your voice out there. It was those women who I heard share their stories that helped me heal within me. You have to really feel confident, and that takes building and learning. It helps having an advocate who truly cared about how I was doing, not just coming from family members, that meant a great deal to me.

Brenda: When you are about to leave the institution and return back home, you have so many hopes and dreams of what it's going to be like; then once you do, you are faced with the reality that it is not at all how you thought things were going to be. It is not a fairytale. Lack of housing, inadequate medical care, mounting bills along with so many other barriers and demands, is what one faces.

With the lack of housing, what isn't helpful are programs that offer housing but they are very strict about what they allow women to have — or not have — if they stay with them. For example, they may only allow a woman to have three pairs of underwear. It allows women no autonomy and continues to control them in ways like they experienced in past relationships or when incarcerated.

Another thing that is really helpful to a successful reentry for a survivor is having specialized counseling about DV and trauma. It can be so critical to be able to address past trauma; otherwise it can often be a layer that can compound and make it more difficult to overcome the barriers that one reentering faces.

What also can be a barrier to a successful reentry is going on parole or probation. That is because an abusive partner can use that "state of control" you are in after getting out of prison and hold it over your head by threatening to contact your parole or probation officer and potentially sabotage your ability to successfully complete your supervised period.

One really complicated aspect of reintegrating is with family. What is helpful — really vital — in reunifying with family and loved ones, particularly children, is to understand that it takes a long time to work through complicated dynamics that may have developed. Children will likely have questions about why things happened, feelings of abandonment, feelings of not being important enough. On the flip side, returning parents will likely have feelings of guilt, questioning if they made the right choices about their children while incarcerated, especially if they were going to serve a life sentence. Having an advocate that can help be a go-between in the reunification process can be really helpful. Reconciling what happened in the past — such as having your child one moment and then, in a matter of moments, having all that change — and what both parent and child need in the present. Facing your children can be really hard, realizing you missed everything and that you weren't there. As a parent, learning how to help your child move on, understanding that you both need to heal, knowing you can't change what happened, but recognizing you made the best decisions you could at the time.

It is coming to terms with all of it, and it is a process. You know, five years have passed since I reentered, and I'm still working on it.

