

Criminal Justice System Responses to COVID 19

March 24, 2020

Violence Free Minnesota – the statewide coalition to end relationship abuse – and the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA) are engaged in ongoing conversations with criminal justice and legal system partners to ensure that victim/survivors and advocacy programs are at the forefront of these conversations.

That said, state agencies and systems are currently stretched thin. Their ability to respond quickly to emerging concerns is extremely limited. As the public health crisis evolves, guidance follows. We – Violence Free Minnesota and MNCASA – ask our memberships to bring forward questions and concerns and we will continue to find answers as quickly as possible.

Our aim is to maintain a transparent line of communication and we will be in contact with you as we learn more.

Sheriffs and County Jails

There are 79 jails in the state, each run by their own elected sheriff. As a result, there is not one united response or approach to the current situation. However, agencies are communicating with one another to share information and updates with one another regarding changes to local policies and protocols.

We know that jails around the state are actively attempting to reduce jail populations in order to ensure that there is space in the jail available in which to house symptomatic individuals.

This reduction of the prison population is happening both at the front end, who they are bringing into the jails, and at the back end, who they believe it is safe to release from the jails.

Criteria for booking into county jails is changing, but **as far as MSA is aware, no one is considering not booking violent offenders.**

Likewise, again **as far as MSA is aware, no sheriff is considering the release of detained individuals charged with DV, SA, or other violent crimes.**

PREA services are continuing in jails. If a particular jail is still allowing in-person visits from professionals, then advocates working with a victim on a PREA issue should also be allowed entry into the jail. Other jails have changed visiting policies such that even professional in-person visits are currently on hold, in which case communicating by phone may be the only PREA option available as well.

There should be **no change or interruption to normal victim notification processes.**



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There should be **no change or interruption to service of protective orders**. (Some departments are moving away from a physical handoff of the orders, opting instead for passing off at the door after making visual contact with the respondent.)

If you are aware that your county jail and/or county sheriff are operating differently and/or victim notification or service of protective orders has been interrupted, please email Nikki Engel at nengel@vmn.org and/or Lindsay. J Brice at lbrice@mncasa.org with detailed information about what is happening in your county and we will be in touch.

Violence Free Minnesota and MNCASA recommend that programs reach out to their county Sheriff and local court administration to gather information about what changes are happening in booking and release in their respective county(ies). If at all possible, please forward this information to Nikki and/or Lindsay and we will begin to compile that information across the state.

