

Texas After Violence Project, Visions After Violence

Interview with Rabia Qutab

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Summary: Alexa Garza interviews Rabia Qutab about her experience as a formerly incarcerated woman of color from Middle Eastern descent. Qutab served five years (whittled down from a 20 year sentence) in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) system and was able to acquire her freedom in 2020. Now she lives in Los Angeles. Qutab discusses in detail the differences between post-incarceration resources in California vs. Texas, and also about her reasons for choosing to spend her time in Protective Custody (in a one-woman cell). Qutab's unique experience sheds light on modes of self-protection within the prison system and the PTSD that lingers post-incarceration, regardless of the measures one takes to avoid politics between inmates, and in spite of supportive family and legal systems that linger "outside."

ALEXA GARZA: Hi Rabia! I want to thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. It is a cold day over here in Texas. I think it's going to snow tonight. So again, I just want to thank you so much and I'll just have you introduce yourself.

RABIA QUTAB: Thank you, Alexa. Hello everyone. My name is Rabia Qutab, and I am a formerly incarcerated woman of color from Middle Eastern descent. I'm here in Los Angeles. However, my incarceration was in the state of Texas. I was looking at a twenty year sentence and through advocacy and an appeal system I was able to bring it down. So I did about five years in Texas Department of Criminal Justice—TDCJ—and was able to acquire my freedom in 2020. As so post-incarceration [I] decided to come to Los Angeles to do my whole re-entry journey, re-entry life.

GARZA: That's interesting that you said that. I'm curious as to why you left Texas. Did you.. they ...did you just want to get out?

QUTAB: So as we talk about, you know, trauma, addiction and recovery—By [the] books, it always says [that] when you're in your recovery [phase], changing people, places and things are very important. You know?

My whole story of incarceration was, was one of a very unique background. I didn't have any childhood trauma. I wasn't in a domestic violence situation growing up. So my incarceration and addiction and my whole idea of trauma began as an adult. But it began in an environment where—usually people ask you “What happened? What caused you to come and land here?” And I actually have no answers to that. And then I always tell people: Drugs do not discriminate individuals. Whether you're from any kind of socio-economic background—any ...your genes doesn't matter. Well they *do* matter when you're understanding the whole idea of addiction *and* genetics. But in reality, my addiction was a whole new journey that landed me facing some time in Texas.

As we all know, Texas is a Southern state, correct? It's a Republican state. The laws are so back --they're so backhanded and, and things in criminal justice have not been yet shed light into reformation. And restorative justice almost doesn't exist on a level that exists in other states.

So, I decided to move to a progressive State. I decided to move to the West side of the world because California is the hub of re-entry resources. So I knew that my journey of re-entry has to.. is to ...a lot to do with what is provided for me. Because as a woman of color coming from an immigrant background, I knew that my re-entry life in Texas would be on another level. As far as I know, people are still struggling to get housing because of your background, and I know that for a fact that my conviction was not going anywhere. So my expungement process was not

going to go anywhere and I knew that I needed to be in a city or in a state where there's a lot of work being done for formerly incarcerated people: not only in re-entry, but in education.

Because I feel like post-incarceration—we have to think about what are we going to do? After we get out of prison to get back on our feet, right? So education is the number one point that comes up. Okay, if I go back to school and you know, work on my degrees, I'll probably at land a better job than I would not having any degrees. So all those things played in factor. And then, secondly, obviously I have some family support in California that I felt like it's important to be closer to family. So I decided to move here.

And then my third main thing was ...the loss. So Ban the Box. Laws like Ban the Box. Do they ask you if you're convicted or not in your school application was a big, big deal for me. Because I already had a college degree prior to incarceration and so going to grad school, I knew that I needed to be a part of a system where there are support for students who are incoming from prison system and expanding the prison to school pipeline. And that pipeline is expanding in a beautiful format in California. And so places like California, New Jersey—being on this side of the world is it's a complete different feeling of being in a state where you have no value because you're a convicted felon. You know?

GARZA: You bring up a lot of great points. I know that the re-entry journey is definitely different in Texas. It's very extremely limited. You can't even compare it to the one in California and stuff. I wanted to touch base on that since you did parole from Texas or were incarcerated in Texas: were you provided your social security card—your ID—upon release?

QUTAB: So in 2019, I went to this program called Safe PF and it was a substance abuse felony facility. I have nothing but horrible things to say about that spot because I feel like it was designed to really dehumanize individuals with addiction. Even though it was a substance abuse facility, it was named as a punishment facility. So you're punished for being a former addict. You're punished for being a former criminal. And the way that that program was designed—it didn't provide you with any re-entry resources upon release. However, it gave you a little bit in-house counseling. But it was so political that it really didn't set us up for success in any format.

And so that place did actually provide us with Social Security and ID to people who already *had* Social Security and ID prior to incarceration. Does that make sense?

So if you don't have your birth certificate, then you're kind of like a lost cause. And so, luckily, I was able to retrieve my Social Security through them because my paperwork was lost in the TCDJ system and they took no accountability of that. My ID was lingering. So I had no identification because my Texas license was lost because they kept moving me from one facility

to another and they just lost my paperwork. So I wasn't able to get my birth certificate because I wasn't born in America. So now the story begins of how I was able to retrieve all that is an a journey... it's an unbelievable story: how I was actually able to retrieve my ID.

GARZA: I can't even imagine. I think it took you, if I'm not mistaken, nine months.

QUTAB: Yeah, it took me nine months to get an *answer* from the immigration services, which was like, our USCIS—And they have it all around. Because I needed that naturalization document from the USCIS to *prove* that I am an American citizen. And mind you I retrieved that document 10 years ago.

And so, because of the pandemic, it took them nine months to send me my appointment for Biometrics. Now, you need an ID to do those biometrics and I was only living on Prison ID and a social security card. So I had to So then the whole process starts: how do I get these biometrics done when they are not approving me [with] prison ID and then I need that document to actually go get a California ID.

GARZA: Wow, I know I know it was a battle. Oh my gosh, Rabia. A lot of people are experiencing that because policy and TDC states that when you are released, they try to strive for you to get your ID and your Social Security documents in hand—for those who do not know. But we're finding that if you were divorced, if you are under a last name, if you're not from this country...There's a lot of barriers that are in place for it. I know that, but I wanted to speak a little bit about your time incarcerated. You spent the majority of your time in PC, which is protective custody.

RABIA: Yes.

Garza: Can you just describe a little bit of why did you decide to do—because it was your *choice*, right? It wasn't because of disciplinary—. Most people assume that you are placed in a one-man cell because of disciplinary cases. But Rabia: you decided to do that for yourself.

QUTAB: I decided to do that for myself because— and I don't want to state names of facilities because this is recorded—but just mind you. Let's go from even county. I did maybe a few months in the county. But when I was given time, I was sent straight to state prison and I went to probably a good four state prisons. And these prisons are infected with corruption on a level that was beyond my understanding. So the general population and then and the community: I noticed that there's so much going on that you can actually find yourself getting in some trouble there, you know? And in reality, I felt like there was not enough programming for me to stay busy and be away from this. So I decided that the solitary time is smarter in general because I don't think that I would have had power and knowledge to fight my case had I not been alone in a cell.

Because you get so caught up with the prison life and the system itself. And then not only you have to deal with, you know, your folks while who are incarcerated with you, but you're dealing with guards. You're dealing with correctional officers who are going to give you a really shitty hard time.

So, it's so much politics and I was tired. I dealt with politics before I went to prison, and I decided I didn't want to deal with politics while was in prison. And so doing solitary time, I think, gave me my space to do a lot of accountability and to do a lot of self-reflection on how I want to live my life when I get the hell out of here. Cuz that's the question that a lot of people forget when they when they are given like a good chunk of amount of years. Like ten plus—they forget the forget that they are gonna once be released and then have to figure out How I'm going to live my life again, or How I'm gonna integrate back into society. What am I going to do with my life? And so I decided to cut that mindset off from my mind (that I'm never going to get out of here for another few years) and just keep it in mind that lets work on my recovery and lets work on my case because that's very important. But the only way I can do this at the best of my ability is being alone and kind of being left away from the general population drama. And the theatrics, you know.

GARZA: I admire that so much because a lot of us do lose sight of that. 95% of the offender's incarcerated will eventually be released whether it's two years, twenty years or whatever. 95% will be released. And that thought process: I admire that, and you are right. The drama that does go with general population, housing... That was a very strong choice in deciding to do your time that way. But your interaction with the officers: was it very limited? Or, I mean ...

QUTAB: No, it was terrible. It was not limited. And I think in reality, I didn't even have any issues with other folks who are incarcerated with me. My main issue was with the actual guards that were placed in these Correctional Facilities. Because I realized that, even in solitary, I had to deal with them back to back all the time.

I'll give you a fine example. When I was in the state prison in let's call it— And can I state names or is it?

GARZA: Yeah.

RABIA: Yeah, so I was in state prison close to Brownwood, Texas. I won't state it. They held... I'm a Muslim. I was born raised Muslim and so my family sent me our holy book, Qur'an. They basically held it for three months and were not allowing me to read my own book. It started very on: the whole problems with authority in in prison system started so early on in my incarceration journey that I already knew that this is not going to get better. So what do we do in

order to make sure that this journey is not going to be as hard as it *is* going to be. And so doing solitary time made me realize that at least I can sit in in my cell and just worry about myself, and not the whole world around me.

Because you will get sucked up in other peoples' dramas while you're incarcerated. And then I started catching myself trying to help others in their situations and I was kind of neglecting myself in the process. And so I had [an] awful awful time, honestly. Maybe and and later on I could say that there were a few correctional guards that, yes, helped me out in solitary. And that's why my time kind of became easier. Because you make that relationship, right? They kind of get to know you, make that relationship, that's when it's things started going well. But at the end of the day, I still had to use drama, politics to get my way right? And so dealing with it alone was much more easier than dealing with a few members in the cell or even another individual than myself.

GARZA: That is just a different perception of it. And I admire that so much. So let's talk about programming. You mentioned it: what was the program? You're shaking your head already.

QUTAB: I'm shaking my head 'cause there was no programming [laughs]. So, okay, let's talk about five years ago, right? If I had this much knowledge that I had now back then, things will be completely different. We don't go to prison system and we're like, advocates. No. Things don't happen to individuals like myself.

When I went to prison, I was a troubled human being. You know? I was a recovering addict and I was super traumatized by the system itself because you're looking at a woman that is a college graduate *and* in grad school—You know? And you're looking at let's say 30 years, because it starts off 30 years for one-time conviction in the state of Texas. And these are not federal charges. Imagine the kind of pressure that person has in this whole journey of like, Oh my God, I'm looking at 30 years? Is it going to get down? And I have the prosecutors basically giving me heads up that if I fight my case, those numbers are going to go only higher. Which was actually not true. You know?

So you have a system that's telling you, If you fight or if you appeal or if you try to get off early than the 30 years we've given you, then we're going to make sure you stay in there for at least half the time or whatever—or 85% of the time. So in reality early 20s, you know, for a woman like me—and I have no help or no idea of the criminal law itself—I'm thinking, Oh my God. So, basically, if I fight this case, then I'm just gonna screw myself over in the system and then end up being criminalized for this.

When this whole situation happened and, you know, I was in solitary, I even decided to be in solitary because I realized there was no programming for the general population in reality. The

only thing that I saw was a wait-listed program to get your GED. And I'm telling you these women were waiting in there, for months and months and months. And some of them were so tired of waiting that they didn't even care anymore.

GARZA: Yeah, and so you're right. Programs... especially for females. Females is very limited consumer compared to the males. Males have more opportunities, vocational training, classes, higher education, just different across the board. And the disparities, you know: it's statistically. They're real and they're actual. And this is not us just saying it's the truth. So you bring up a lot of great points and stuff.

QUTAB: And that's the thing, though. So there's so much limited programming for women inside in the prison system. Because of this limited programming, it does not allow females to look beyond the box. It doesn't. Then you get so sucked up in the prison life. And then you start thinking that this is reality and this is home for you. But in reality ... in general: those moments are going to be released. And then what are they going to do post-incarceration? What are they going to do when they actually come back to the society.

So by limiting their programming while they're incarcerated is the worst thing you can do to somebody. Because you're literally not even allowing them to grow and have a set-up while they're outside. In general, obtaining a GED should not even be something to think twice about. That should be something every facility should offer to every woman that is incarcerated. If you don't have your high school diploma, there should be a process to get into programming that you can acquire a GED. Because that's the first step into education. And the fact that I saw women waiting months and months and months and months trying to get in this program. And then they pick people that they know that they like and then there's—there you go again with the politics. Who you know in prison is very important. [It] shouldn't be like that, but it is like that. And so, while these women were waiting, honestly, they got so tired of it because those programming's are made for you to stay busy and for you to learn and grow. And so when you are actually released, you can use that and then move on forward in your education, you know?

GARZA: You know that they all have tablets now. They're getting their tablets now, and I served 19 years. You served your time in PC solitary confinement. And I was just thinking about what that would mean for us, if we were still there—tablets. I'm thinking, is it predatory practices by organizations that are families are going to have to pay all this money to get us books or movies or educate, you know? Cuz, you know, nothing's ever free. There's nothing ever free.

QUTAB: Nothing's ever free! And then mind you that they will charge you for installing any apps, right? Because everything is like—So you're paying what? \$200 for a tablet that you technically cannot even take it with you when you're out. And then you're getting charged for everything extra you get on the tablet. And then I heard—I don't know if they do that in Texas,

think it's like the amount is like 200 and something dollars even to get it released. And then when you get the release tablet, it's actually of no use in the free world. So it's like capitalizing what mass incarceration does: you're making money to the business to the people who are business owners that are basically selling these tablets and then it's getting recycled within the criminal justice system and it's literally a business. This whole thing is a business, you know?

GARZA: Yeah, it is somewhat uncertain. I don't have any—I still haven't really thought it out, but I'm thinking, I mean.

QUTAB: I am all for technology and and by grace of God, I am very privileged that when I was incarcerated, I already knew how to type, I knew how to read. I already knew how to—but in reality, there's not a lot of people that do know and understand these tablets, but when they come into our facility, they want to buy it because it's something new right? And then they force their families to come up with the money to get their tablets. And sometimes you have families that cannot afford it, but then they have their loved ones inside incarcerated that they want to cater to. And so you're basically making this whole cycle. It's the cycle of capitalism and just, you know, yeah.

GARZA: What has been your experience, Rabia, with being a convicted felon? Do you get—for myself: I was denied housing several times here in Texas. You are in California, but your convictions are in Texas. Does that show up? How does that work?

QUTAB: So when I was released from Texas to California, my stipulations, I was going to be 10 years on papers. That stipulation only came through because I didn't do my minimum 10 year sentence, and my minimum 10-year sentence wouldn't even promise me to parole out. So I decided to file and do this fight and do this appeal process because I realized that if I fight at least I have a chance. If I don't have a chance, I'll still do the same time. So why not just fight and see if I can get out early? Because I realized that my rehabilitation wasn't even being done inside. I had to come out to re-get rehabilitated on my own. And so when I came from Texas to California, this conviction is going to live with me, probably for the next eight years now.

But luckily in the state of California, there's a lot of forgiveness for people with backgrounds when it comes to jobs, when it comes to housing, and it when it comes to financial support, right? So the fact that I've made a decision to move West-side and moved – come to Los Angeles because I knew it was a hub of re-entry resources. Because technically I was homeless. I didn't have a home, you know? And so my only home was either going to my sister's house or seeking some kind of transitional support. And then I decided to seek out transitional housing in California. Now mind you, in Texas—how many women do you know who get out in Texas and then they can seek out to an organization and be put in a place in a transitional home? And this has nothing to do with their agents. I will say zero.

GARZA: I was going to say zero other than something if it's church-related.

QUTAB: Unless it's church-related, then yeah. Well, what about people that are not Christians, right?

GARZA: Zero. Nothing that comes to mind.

QUTAB: Zero hope. So, I knew that in Texas, this conviction history would probably not even allow me to go back to school because I was a pre-medical major, so my background was science. My degree was in chemistry. So all that will play a part with the conviction —type of conviction I have. I already knew that housing would be a no-no, for sure. Unless somebody will sign a lease for me, I would not be able to get no housing with my conviction in Texas. So coming to California: Yes. It came behind me. My conviction comes behind my name. But at least here, I actually work as an advocate and a leader who's very open about her background. So, I work in a space where my lived experience is given value. I *live* in housing where my lived experience is valuable.

So the fact that you know, we call it "Second Chance Life"—and second chance life means that you were once a criminal—a convicted felon—and now you have, you know, came into redemption and you're now fixing your life. And you believe in second chances. and second chances are big thing in California. So in a state like Texas where you don't even know what Second Chance life means you have probably like 20 percent chance of even being successful post re-entry, unless you have *full* family support.

And that's what Texas emphasizes on, right? They like when you get out, Go to your family, get family support. But in California, they actually let you be who you are individually, and then there are support services. But if we don't have family there's still a lot of organizations willing to help you in housing and employment and education. And so with my conviction, I don't hide my conviction, I'm very open about it. However, I feel like it would have probably given me a lot of issues if I wasn't in a space where it's open and it's valuable to have lived experience.

And so educational wise—now I'll give you another example—I'm applying to grad school programs through P2P (Prison to PhD program). So I'm applying to grad school programs through programs who are built by formerly incarcerated scholars and PhDs and doctors because I feel like I have more chance to get into schools. However, now if I was going into, you know, a program that is not inclusive and maybe does not have a lot of former incarcerated scholars in there, then yes: I would have an issue. But then luckily for California, they passed a law Ban the Box in 2020. And so now you don't even have to stay with your conviction history for financial aid or for applications. So all those progressive laws change the dynamic of people in the

re-entry journeys. It changes the dynamic of somebody who is a convicted felon, and now they're *not* a convicted felon because they're actually effective members of societies.

And so what I say In a lot of my meetings is, being a convicted felon is actually sexy now [laughs]. You know what I mean? Being formally incarcerated to us is actually sexy because you are one person that dismantles the trauma of the system. And now you're out here with all the people doing the job, and the work that you were meant to do and what you wanted to do, when and what you desired to do. So, I feel like my conviction here does not fall with me too harsh because I have made my life surrounded by people who support formerly incarcerated communities.

Now if I was in Texas, I'm not going to kid: I have to get a friend to sign my lease or a family member, I believe that I won't be able to get housing in Texas. If I even go back to Texas now, there would probably be a zero chance for me to land my own apartment.

GARZA: And that's true. That's true. But you know— being in Texas, working in Texas, that was a big choice that you made to leave and it was the right one and I'm so proud of you. You are a fellow Justice fellow with the Education Trust. You were, fresh out—when were you released, Rabia, if you don't mind me asking?

QUTAB: 2020. Summer time, 2020.

GARZA: Summer time 2020. And I just wanted to bring another perspective of your journey post-incarceration: if you had to sum up your experience in TDCJ, what would that look like? For me, looking back on it, it seems like I don't even recognize that person that did that time.

QUTAB: Yes.

GARZA: Does that make sense?

RABIA: I completely understand what you mean because, as for you too, Alexa, you've come such far along. And I can't even imagine somebody—I mean, my little time does not compare to, you know, 19 years. Doing almost two decades of your life and coming out and still having hope in this criminal justice system is like: to me, it's epic. It's revolutionary, because in reality, more so than me, you have seen the ins and outs of the facilities and what they do. And so I do believe that as women of color, we make choices, right? We make choices that Yes, we committed a crime. We made mistakes. Then how do we learn from this?

So, if you tell me, even when I was incarcerated, I still don't recognize the person I used to be [when] incarcerated. Because I can't believe that I actually okay doing all that solitary time—I do

believe that the person who I was back then is what made me who I am now. But no, I sometimes forget my journey. I have to almost put it on a back burner because there were times of my incarceration period that are very blurry to me. Like, I don't even remember: it went by so quick. And I don't know if it happened with you, but it did it to me. Like those years go by so quick because you're doing the same thing every day. It's like day in and out. It's like in and out doing the same thing.

But I think what happened with me was since I was fighting my case, my whole focus was on trying to get out, trying to get free. Like let's just fight to get out of this system because in reality, recidivism is real in Texas. And when I was in the halfway house in Odessa, Texas, I remember looking around and I even thought to myself, 80% of these women are going to come back. And, you know why? Because they didn't know where they were going after they were going to leave the halfway house.

Which is the saddest thing that I could say: that they had no place to go. And the ones that were going back home, were going to go back home to domestic violence, to addiction and drugs. And they even they even asked, they said, What if we don't want to go back home? Where do we get released? There was no housing for the women anywhere.

GARZA: The halfway house that you spoke of: you were mandated to go there for the program that you were in.

QUTAB: Yeah. I was mandated to go there for — and the time frame was too months. Okay, so two months: you got to get your shit together, basically. But how are you going to get your shit together when they weren't even letting women work there? And I kid you not: I can see myself maybe two, three years from now—hopefully I'm able to get on my feet well enough that I can go back and maybe advocate for the system there—because the way they run these halfway houses: it's like it's the same way they run prisons, right? And it's not even restorative *at all*. It's not Transitional Living. It's literally another form of prison. And I was in the halfway house during the time of COVID. And I kid you not, we had 25 women that were just sitting around for two months and were not able to work and were told that they had to leave in two months and they didn't have any housing for them. So they had to go back to the families. And these families, like I said, they were still involved. Actively.

GARZA: Were you able to get any kind of training at that halfway house?

QUTAB: So, let me tell you how politics came in play. So the person who ran the facility? They did like me as a person. So they let me work. I advocated for two of my homies, and then they were able to work. So, I had four people in two months working with me, but that was all we could do. And the rest of the women—the total space for the woman were 30. So the rest of the

women—so four out of 30 women were able to work, and then the rest of the women were literally sitting around doing programming all day. There was no programming going on the halfway house. It was literally watching movies all day. In the day area. Day room.

GARZA: Wow, I didn't know that. I didn't know that.

QUTAB: And the in-house counselors were more worried about finding contrabands like, not even contrabands—I don't know what they were looking for—than being able to support you post-incarceration. Yeah.

GARZA: So even though you were released from prison, you were still mandated to this two month program at this halfway house until you were—So the rules of the halfway house were still enforced.

QUTAB: The rules of the halfway house were still enforced. And also, the halfway house rules were so ridiculous that they actually could give you a violation for parole or probation and then you'll be sent to court again. So four women out of those 30 women— four women were working for them while I was there for two months were violated because they got caught smoking cigarettes

GARZA: Wow.

QUTAB: So they went back and got re-sentenced. And I believe all of them went to State Prison all over again.

Yeah, but in my mind, Alexa, the whole thing—As a young girl, I never realized the strength of reformation until I was actually out here in LA and I realized Wow, there's people actually doing the job of changing and dismantling the system. But I didn't know these people in Texas. I—who are they? I had nobody that came.... Because in CDCR facilities over here in California, there's programming that goes on while you're incarcerated and you meet all these advocates from, you know, different organizations, like Homeboy Industries, like prison education, programs, like anti-recidivism Coalition and they go inside these facilities, and they teach and they educate for the incarcerated folks.

That look: this is what we offer when you get out. But do we have that in Texas?

GARZA: No.

QUTAB: No. And the importance of outreach work is so important because 90% of the people that I meet that are in transitional—they get these transitional resources from while they're

incarcerated. Because they met somebody who is doing the programming work for these re-entry resources while they were in prison. Two, three months before they get released, they start signing up for stuff. So when they get out, they have a place to go. So when they get out, they might have some folks helping him look for jobs. But do we have that in Texas? No.

GARZA: You bring up a lot of great points. Like we know that the system can work because we see it work in other states. Georgia: Our fellow cohort, Patrick, is working on Ban the Box. The Box there.

Big movement to get that for next session there. California has a great re-entry support services for pre-incarceration and post-incarceration. So, you know, we're focusing on education, workforce housing. I mean, all these are great things and it's non-existent or extremely limited to the point of non-existence in Texas if it's not religion based. The only programs that I can think of are programmings that you have to attend are certain classes, certain churches, or certain religious activities and programming for that. And that's just really surprising to me, but I just wanted to speak with you for your, you know, your value, and your expertise, and your experience with it.

QUTAB: And the idea of re-entry – One of the things I would also suggest is it's not just based on an individual's, right? So you're assigned a probation or parole officer.

GARZA: Yes.

QUTAB: What is their job when it comes to—So, in Texas, I feel like their job description is completely different than ones I've seen in California. So in California, there's a process of referral housing through your PO, through your agent. I don't think that exists in Texas at any level.

GARZA: It exists in policy.

QUTAB: Okay.

GARZA: Actualization: No. My experience with it—This is me: I was on an ankle monitor for 30 days and they were like, We're so overloaded with work we're going to do your onboarding with six of you in the same office so I can just tell the six of you at the same time the same thing and you're here for this, this, this and this. So all your business is out there with six strangers that you don't know. You really can't ask any questions because there's no time because we're so backed up. I sat in the parole office for 12 hours that first day, trying to get my paperwork and everything situated on a monitor. So it was it was an adventure in and of itself just like them first coming in to the—

QUTAB: I feel like my experience would – even people how they tell me because I didn't technically experience the whole parole in Texas, but as far as I know, you know, people that I've spoken with: they do so much of programming when it comes to drug testing and all sorts of other things. They forget that what the importance is, right? I mean, where's the education falls into all this? Where does employment fall into all this? I feel like, people have different relationships with bills, but I think that the referral process needs to be more like utilized in the sense that they should be a pipeline from you getting out to you having the relationship with your PO and how somehow PO connects you to the re-entry resources. And since there's so much limited re-entry resources, that's where it's everything falls under a crack.

So the good news is the way that California, feel like, does a lot of things that kind of you know—it's hard. But sometimes you have agents that connect you to these resources to hear if the individuals are not able to do it on their own, you know? But the best thing that I want to put very much emphasis on it, is that outreach work of these re-entry programs in prison itself. Because that's when you make the first difference. You know: talking to individuals while they're incarcerated, talking to individuals who are incarcerated who are former lifers about to get out, you know. That's how the whole connection begins.

GARZA: You bring up a lot of good points and you have a lot of value that you added to this conversation. I appreciate you so much for taking the time and, you know, just talking with me. One last thing I wanted to ask you. What is your opinion on counseling? A lot of PTSD happens for those of us that were incarcerated, you know.

When I hear keys jangle—when I hear someone's keys, I automatically think the officer is coming because the officer would wear their keys on their belt. Things of that nature.

Counseling: that would also fall under the umbrella of non-existent in Texas. You know, it just hurts me to hear about the ladies at that halfway house who didn't have anywhere else to go, you know? Is counseling something that you think would benefit?

QUTAB: Okay, so I am so privileged to be a part of Los Angeles Partnership Regional program's Integrated Health Team. So it's a learning process. When I came to California, I was so educated on all the intersection of Criminal Justice and education. I didn't realize that we need to learn about mental well-being in general, which is called the integrated health post-incarceration. So this is where you have to understand the importance of normalizing therapy and counseling to folks that are trauma-enforced. They have addiction, substance abuse disorders, any kind of like domestic violence trauma—.

There has to be a fine line to understand: normalizing counseling and therapy is very important. Having open conversations about your individual trauma is very important. So doing a risk assessment may be in the halfway houses or you know, maybe a month before getting released is very important. Those risk assessments are basically designed—and I don't know if Texas has it but we're actually enforcing that in California now—in order for clinical licensed counselors to come in the facilities and give these assessments to individuals who sign up. Individuals that have ever faced suicidal background or, or they are risk of suicide or they are, you know, showing signs of anxiety, PTSD, you know, a psychosis, schizophrenia. They are hopefully—this is going to start happening because we're very much working on this agenda—to be given resources post-incarceration to link their Medi-Cal or the insurance company if they have it to the therapy organization.

So I don't know if Texas does that, but Medi-Cal is offered to folks who are incarcerated 30 days before they are getting released, right? So when you get out, you have health insurance. And this health insurance covers Rehabilitation Facilities services. So you can actually get a free session every week for 60 minutes with any private or public licensed clinical social worker or a therapist at their expense.

So, normalizing therapy and counseling is extremely important because anybody that's faced any term or any type of incarceration has some sort of trauma. Whether this trauma came pre-incarceration or it came while you were incarcerated, that trauma exists for everyone. So counseling, support groups, addiction services and therapy, psychotherapy—any kind of support for your well-being and for integrated health—is super important to understand. And I hope that states do this agenda where sometimes parole or probation stipulations require you to do some kind of therapy—I know mine does.

But I think it's very important for individuals to seek help. Because for us, when we know that there's help out there, we'll get help. When there's limited amount of help it's hard to. But PTSD is really real. And PTSD trickles down to different parts of your life. It can be in another form of your relationship building, right? Your relationships with your families, your partners, your kids. So if you're not working on, you know, healing from those trauma, it'll slowly trickle down to your personal and professional and private life. And that's why I give all 100% appreciation to any kind of counseling or therapy that one can seek post-incarceration, for sure.

GARZA: You're amazing. You're amazing Rabia. Yeah, I appreciate you so much. I know that coming from where you were—PC—and your journey to where you are right now—I'm just really just honored and to be in your space and your friend and I just admire you so much and I thank you so much for the opportunity and the time that you just took here. But do not get them off. I'm just going to stop the recording.