

TAKE ACTION

Reaching Out to Incarcerated People and Their Families

It's important to put a face on mass incarceration. It's not just an abstract system that needs to be dismantled; it's millions of real people whose lives have been affected, deeply and often irreparably, by it. Finding opportunities to communicate with them reminds us what's at stake. By reaching through the prison walls or beyond them to families, we already take an initial (if symbolic) step towards ending mass incarceration by refusing to accept the system's assertion that incarcerated people are dangerous and must be isolated from the rest of society.

One easy way to get involved is to correspond with incarcerated people, which requires relatively little time from volunteers and serves at least three important functions. It contributes to the volunteer's education

and understanding of prisons. It builds the morale of the incarcerated person. And it can actually improve his/her safety. "Mail call" is public in prisons, so everybody knows who's receiving mail and who isn't. An incarcerated person who never receives mail is tagged as abandoned and becomes vulnerable to attack or exploitation; s/he would have no advocates outside the system. For those interested in becoming a prison pen pal, see the facing page for guidance.

Visiting is a step up from writing to an incarcerated person regularly. If the person you are visiting is a member of your community, the visit is all the more important, because it reminds all involved that s/he is still one of you, despite the current circumstance of incarceration. On page 167, director and storyteller Eileen McAdams reflects on her experience visiting an incarcerated woman; Eileen is her only visitor. See the facing page for guidance on how to become a formal visitor in federal or military prison. For local or state facilities, a good first step is to contact the chaplain.

Another avenue for volunteering is with the families of incarcerated people. Incarceration can make life exponentially more difficult for these families (see p. 80), and a variety of programs exist to help support them. These range from help that relates directly to the facts of incarceration (such as arranging transportation to make visiting incarcerated family easier) to more general support and encouragement (e.g., one-on-one tutoring, holiday parties). **The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated** at Rutgers University maintains a list of national organizations providing such services (<https://nrcf.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/directory/national-programs>).

You can also search for local organizations such as Virginia-based Assisting Families of the Incarcerated (www.foi.org).

"It's a moral argument that, historically, leads to reform. You think of HIV/AIDS. It's not until the people impacted spoke directly to the public that you started seeing real change."⁵²⁵

- Glenn E. Martin, founder of Just Leadership USA

Finally, if you don't have the capacity for a sustained volunteer commitment, inviting a formerly incarcerated person (or a family member) to speak at a community event is another way to put a human face on the prison system. Local coalitions fighting mass incarceration can often connect you with returning citizens who are available to speak publicly.

Ultimately, these various forms of correspondence and volunteering should aim to bring down barriers and forge relationships with those most directly affected by mass incarceration: communities of color. Their leadership is crucial in the fight to end mass incarceration. One way to measure the effectiveness of volunteer efforts is to ask how much they contribute to putting the voices and agenda of directly-affected people at the center of the movement.

⁵²⁵ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/03/04/how-to-cut-the-prison-population-by-50-percent>

RESOURCES FOR VOLUNTEERING TO VISIT INCARCERATED PEOPLE

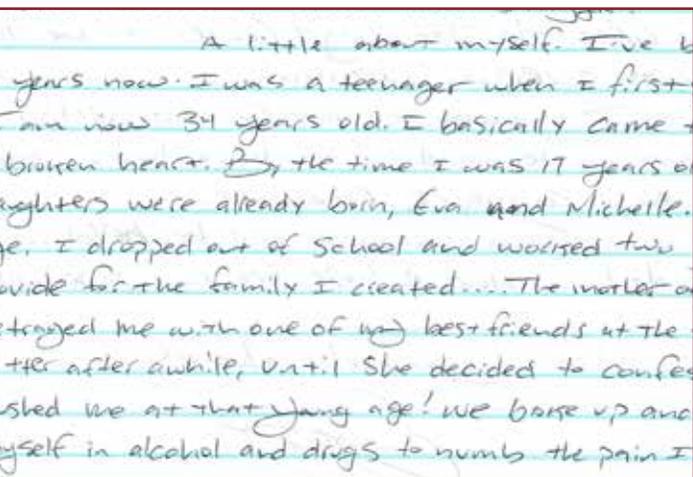
Prisoner Visitation and Support (PVS) is the only nationwide, interfaith visitation program with access to all federal and military prisons and prisoners in the United States. Founded in 1968, today PVS has 400 volunteers who visit at more than 100 federal and military prisons across the country. The visitors make monthly visits to see prisoners who rarely, if ever, receive outside visits. PVS visitors also focus on seeing those prisoners with an acute need for human contact: those serving long sentences, those frequently transferred from prison to prison, and those in solitary confinement and on death row. No other group has this access. PVS is very selective in appointing local volunteer visitors, who are appointed only after a personal interview with one of the PVS visitor recruiters. For more information, visit <http://www.prisonervisitation.org/> or email Executive Director Eric Corson at ecorson@prisonervisitation.org.

RESOURCES FOR BECOMING PEN PALS WITH AN INCARCERATED PERSON

- SolitaryWatch runs a project, Lifelines to Solitary, that matches pen pals on the outside with incarcerated people held in solitary confinement. For more information, visit <http://www.nrcat.org/torture-in-us-prisons/write-a-letter>.
- Phyllis B. Taylor was the Jewish chaplain in the Philadelphia prison system for 18 years. She now runs a pen pal program. Email her at rktptb@me.com.
- Black and Pink (www.blackandpink.org), based in Massachusetts, advocates for LGBT incarcerated people and runs a pen pal system.
- The November Coalition (www.november.org), based in Washington State, advocates for an end to the drug war and does some prison correspondence matching. Email Executive Director Nora Callahan, nora@november.org.
- The Prisoner Correspondence Project (<http://www.prisoner-correspondenceproject.com/>), based in Montreal, coordinates a pen pal program for LGBT incarcerated people in Canada and the U.S.

- Human Rights Pen Pals (<http://humanrightspenpals.org/pen-pals/>) connects free people and people incarcerated in California's solitary confinement units as pen pals.

For the sake of your own safety, all of these groups will advise you to use a PO Box or an organization (synagogue, workplace, etc.) for a return address, rather than your home address, and to avoid using your full name.



Letter from solitary, in response to a card from Rabbi Singer's congregation (see following page)

For the past five years I've been visiting an inmate at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester, NY. Once a month we sit across the table from each other, talking over a meal as any two friends out for lunch might do. And although I did not know her when I first began visiting, our friendship has grown into a mutually caring relationship and has become an important part of her life as she serves her twenty-to-life sentence. Inmates with long sentences often receive less and less visitors as the years go by. Parents die, family members move away, friends drop out. Yet visitors play an important part in an inmate's recovery - lifting morale, helping their fight against depression and encouraging belief in a meaningful future. If you are considering visiting a woman at Bedford and have any questions about my experience, I would be happy to share them with you.

– Eileen McAdam, emcadam@hvc.rr.com

100 POSTCARDS

Rabbi Suzanne Singer of Riverside, CA shares the following: [In December 2015,] members of my congregation sent 100 cards to men in solitary, letting them know that we were thinking about them and praying for them by name. The letters we wrote ended: "Your journey is a difficult one but it is our hope that this note will give you strength. Please know that you are not forgotten."

The thank you notes we received testify to the power of this simple action. One Jewish inmate wrote: "I received your note and it made my day and will continue to bring me joy and happiness as I remember your kindness...I came to prison in 1995, at 20 years old...I sat in solitary for seven years...If you could keep me in mind with any Jewish thoughts, lessons, studies or wisdom that you could send I'd like that very much." Motivated by this response, and knowing that our actions made a difference, my congregation plans to write and send more cards soon.