



Guidelines for Correspondents

Thank you for volunteering to correspond with a person in solitary confinement. No letters you ever write will mean as much to their recipient as the messages you send into solitary. You may be the only real human connection available to your correspondent, and their only conduit to the outside world.

Because the letters you send are so important and powerful to the people who receive them, we urge you to keep up the correspondence, writing at least once a month. During especially busy times, a colorful card with a short note can take the place of a full letter, but longer letters are always greatly valued.

And, because you are writing to an incarcerated person, there are many restrictions that apply to your correspondence. Some are prison rules; others are common sense. Please read the following carefully; knowing some of the major rules and regulations can make your exchanges much less complicated, not to mention help evolve your concept of the world inside and the roles people play, and the humanity gap we've set out to bridge.

Before You Begin

- Participants in the Lifelines to Solitary program must be 18 or older—no exceptions, even with parental consent. By agreeing to participate, you are warranting that you are an adult. In addition, if you are a young adult and transient—for example, a college student—we ask that you carefully consider whether you can make the commitment to correspond on a regular basis over the long term before joining the program.
- In managing Lifelines to Solitary, we take what measures we can to ensure your privacy and safety. We provide an address you can use to receive mail, and encourage those who do not feel comfortable using their real names to use an alias. We count on you as a correspondent to take whatever additional common-sense measures you feel are needed to safeguard your identity, if this is of concern to you. We are here to make connections and are always happy to offer advice and support, but beyond this, responsibility for the correspondence rests with you.
- We accept all people in solitary confinement who request a pen pal into the Lifelines to Solitary program. We do not screen on the basis of the crimes for which they have been incarcerated, and seldom know what those crimes are. Many of the people who participate in the program have been convicted of serious felonies. If for any reason this is not something you are comfortable with, this program may not be right for you. There are many other ways to work for more humane prison conditions, including joining an advocacy campaign, supporting legislative or policy change, and donating to Solitary Watch or other organizations.
- Unfortunately, we do not have the capacity to take requests for pen pals who are a particular gender or age, or who are located in a particular state. As noted below, we do encourage you to let us know if something specific about your correspondence makes you feel uncomfortable. If it cannot be resolved, we can assign you a new pen pal—though this has not yet happened in the history of the program.

Getting Started

- For all correspondence, please use the following return address:

YOUR NAME/ALIAS HERE

Solitary Watch
123 7th Avenue #166
Brooklyn NY 11215

We will promptly forward all letters to the home address you provide us. This protects the privacy and safety of everyone involved. Do not give out your home address or phone number.

- If you prefer not to use your last name, please feel free to use an alias. Simply let us know the name you have chosen, so that we can correctly forward your mail.
- Always include your correspondent's corrections department ID number in their mailing address.
- Do not use stickers, including return address stickers. In many states they are not allowed.
- For your first letter, be aware that the recipient may not know the details of the Lifelines to Solitary program. Please explain that you received their address from Solitary Watch, and would like to begin corresponding. Some examples to get you started:

"You don't know me, but I was connected with you through the Solitary Watch letters program."

"We've never met, but Solitary Watch gave me your name when I told them I wanted to get involved. If you'd like and can write back, I'd be happy to be a pen pal."

"You don't know me, but Solitary Watch connected us through their pen pal program. If you aren't interested or able to write back, I completely understand. If you would like to talk, I promise I'll write back."

- Your first letter should include some basic information about who you are, what your interests are, why you wanted to participate in the letter-writing program, and how often you feel you can write. Ask them about their interests and what they like to think, read, and write about.
- You should be clear in your first letter about your own limitations in order to create accurate and reasonable expectations about your correspondence. For example, you may wish to mention that you are not able to provide legal or other individual assistance to your correspondent.
- Please do not ask your correspondent what they "did"—i.e. what crime they committed. People in prison are often defined by their crimes, but they are in fact much more than that.
- Also, please avoid using terms like *convict*, *inmate*, and even *prisoner*. Incarcerated people are people, and should be referred to as such.
- Allow up to a month to receive a response from your correspondent. Mail moves more slowly behind prison walls. If you have not received a reply in a month, please contact your coordinator at Solitary Watch—we will gladly assign you a new correspondent.

- If for some reason you cannot continue writing to your correspondent, please notify your coordinator at Solitary Watch.

General Guidelines

- The best letters are those that are personal and informative without being too intimate. People in prison enjoy hearing about news and ideas from the world outside. Write as if you were writing to an acquaintance, and later on perhaps a friend.
- We advise against sending money to your correspondent or making donations to their commissary accounts.
- We also advise against sending just about anything else. You may think you are doing something kind when in fact you are sending in contraband that can get the recipient in deeper trouble. (Postage stamps, for example, cannot be sent into most prisons).
- One possible exception to this rule is books and magazines, which are usually allowed, though often with restrictions (such as no hardcover books, or only books sent directly from the vendor). These can be welcome gifts if and when requested, and if sent in accordance with the rules in your correspondent's state.
- Never agree to forward a letter to a third party, or contact someone on the outside on behalf of your correspondent.
- If your correspondent suggests any kind of relationship that is not strictly platonic, please be kind but clear and firm in letting them know this is not what you are looking for.
- Correspondents may ask for legal help or advice, or may report ill-treatment or unjust placement in solitary. Unfortunately, there are few resources available to help with these kinds of problems, but feel free to contact Solitary Watch to see if we can make a referral in the appropriate state.
- Please note that generally anything that you write to your correspondent, and anything your correspondent writes to you, can be read by prison staff. Please use your best judgment in terms of the content of what you write to ensure that you do not put your correspondent at any further risk of harm or retaliation.

If anything about your correspondent's letters makes you uncomfortable or concerned, please feel free to speak up. Above all, if you find yourself looking for guidance on anything—even if it seems small or “silly” to you—your coordinator is your best resource. We are endlessly grateful for your participation in Lifelines to Solitary, and will always do whatever we can to help you get (and give) the most out of this intense, sometimes difficult, often wonderful experience. We also love to hear your stories, insights, and ideas—so please keep in touch!

Warmly,

Marlies Talay
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