

The Medical Cannabis Advocate's Handbook



SUPPORTING POWs

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Several patients and providers are in jail awaiting trial and others are in prison serving out harsh sentences. Although the actions of many of these prisoners were legal under state law, defendants are not legally permitted to bring up a medical defense in federal court. Please show your support for these prisoners by writing them letters or supporting them in one of the following ways:

- 1. Write letters.** Your letter doesn't have to be a Pulitzer prize winning effort—even a postcard would do. You might also want to send drawings or photographs. Never written to a prisoner before? Check out the tips provided below.
- 2. Buy them newspaper or magazine subscriptions.** Help these prisoners stay connected to the outside world. As long as the magazine or newspaper comes straight from the publisher, it's usually not a problem. However, you cannot send magazines yourself—they must come directly from the publisher. Check with the institution where the prisoner is housed for the proper procedure, and check with the prisoner about what publications he or she is most interested in.
- 3. Order books for them online.** Or, if you can find a bookstore that is willing to ship via the U.S. mail, that would be acceptable, too. Unfortunately, you cannot send books that you've purchased from the bookstore—they must come directly from a bookstore or an online bookstore. They must be sent via the U.S. mail and they cannot be sent in such a way that they must be signed for.
- 4. Put money in their commissary.** Money donated to prisoners can go a long way; often, the toiletries provided by the prison are horrible and prisoners must purchase any "upgrade" through the commissary. Even a small amount of money can mean a great deal to a

prisoner, as it ensures access to things like decent toothbrushes and other hygiene products. In addition, if a prisoner wants to communicate with their friends and family on the outside, they must purchase phone cards and stamps. If you're interested in donating to a prisoner's commissary, contact Western Union, preferably by phone. The operator knows exactly how to send it. You'll need an address and prisoner number (see below).

WRITING TO PRISONERS:

One of the main problems that prevents people from getting involved in supporting prisoners is a feeling of being intimidated about writing for the first time. It is very hard to write a letter to someone you don't know; people find that they don't know what to say, they feel there are things they can't talk about, or think that prisoners won't be interested in what they have to say. It is a problem most of us have had to get over, so we've drawn up some suggestions to help you. Obviously, these aren't rigid guidelines, and we don't pretend to have solved all of the problems here. Different people will write different letters. Hopefully, this document will be of some use to you.

FIRST THING'S FIRST: Some prisons restrict the number of letters a prisoner can write or receive, and they may have to buy stamps and envelopes. Prisoners aren't millionaires, so don't necessarily expect a reply to a card or letter. A lot of prisons allow stamps or a self addressed stamped envelope to be included with a card or letter, but some don't. Letters also get stopped, read, delayed, and 'diverted.' If you suspect your letter will be nicked by the



screws, you can send it Recorded delivery, which unfortunately costs a lot but then they have to open it in the prisoner's presence. Also, you should put a return address so the prisoner can reply, and because some prisons don't allow letters without a return address. Of course it doesn't have to be your address, but be careful using P.O. Box numbers as some prisons don't allow these either. Check the institution where the prisoner is housed—most prison and jail websites list the rules for writing to their inmates. Even if the rule seems silly or pointless, you should follow it, or your letter may be destroyed or diverted.

WRITING FOR THE FIRST TIME: Say who you are and that you're an activist with ASA. It's probably best to be up front about your politics as well, to give prisoners the choice to stay in contact with you or not. Say where you heard about him or her and his or her case. The first letter can be reasonably short, maybe only a postcard. Obviously, when you get to know people better, you'll have more to talk about. If you are writing to a "framed" prisoner and you believe them to be innocent, it helps to say so, as it gives them confidence to know that you believe them. If you're writing to a medical cannabis POW, let them know that you support the cause and that you're doing everything you can to work on changing the laws so that in the future no one will be forced to serve time for medical cannabis.

Some people are afraid to talk about their lives with prisoners, thinking this may depress prisoners with long sentences, or that they might not be interested in your life. Although in some cases this may be true, on the whole a letter is the high point of the day for most prisoners. Prison life is boring and monotonous and any news that livens it up, whether it's about people they know or not, is generally welcome. If you didn't know them before they went to prison, they'll want to know about you, what your life is like, what is going on in the world. Use common sense—don't write about anything that is likely to get a prisoner into trouble with the screws or

that might get you or anyone else in trouble with the cops. Some people find it's best to write your first letter as though you were writing your long-distance grandparent. Once you've received a response, you'll have a jumping off point for future letters.

THEY'RE IN THERE FOR US, WE'RE OUT HERE FOR THEM: For people imprisoned from our movement, it's vital to keep them involved in the ongoing resistance—tell them about actions, send them magazines if they want them, discuss ideas and strategies with them. Use your head though. Some people will just want to keep their head down 'til they are released.

(Adapted from a leaflet by the Anarchist Black Cross.)

A FEW DOS AND DON'TS ON WRITING PRISONERS WHOSE BACKGROUNDS OR POLITICS YOU MAY NOT KNOW.

DOS

Do use common sense. Use a "neutral" address, such as a Post Office Box, for correspondence (if allowed by the institution). Do not divulge sensitive personal information (i.e. your home address, phone number, credit card and bank details, people's full names, etc.) to a prisoner, particularly one you have never dealt with before. This is for your security and that of the prisoner. Be aware that authorities often read these letters and sensitive information can get into the wrong hands. Occasionally, prisoners have misused this information as well. Do not send money or honor immediate requests for money.

Do think ahead. Research local prison regulations. Learn about the prisoner before writing. Make sure to put a return address on your envelope. When first writing to an incarcerated person, make sure you ask them specifically what the rules are for writing letters, and make a careful note of them. No one under 18 years of age should be writing a prisoner—again, this is for the prisoner's security as well as the writer's.

Do be forward and clear in your letter as well as your intentions. Say who you are and that you're a medical cannabis activist. Be up front about your politics and say where you heard about the prisoner and his or her case. If you are interested in starting a pen-pal relationship and that is all, say so. Ask if they would like to correspond and if they'd like to discuss any topics, as well as what topics they don't wish to discuss. Keep your first letter reasonably short and to the point.

Do be patient. Prisoners may not write back or may take a while. They may occasionally sound cynical, angry or disinterested in their words -- keep in mind many "supporters" or people who've written before may have stopped writing them, broken promises they made or lied to them, or they just had a rough day and they're venting that on paper. Responding to an angry letter with more anger is not helpful.

Do deal with the right channels. If a prisoner wants you to send a book, ask what channels their institution requires for that, or refer them to a Book-to-Prisoners project near their unit. If a prisoner is getting out in the next few weeks, do not offer your place to stay (no matter how desperate they sound) unless you have corresponded for a significant amount of time and are in contact with both a parole officer and a prison intermediary (e.g. prison chaplain). Even in cases like this, it is far more helpful to a prisoner to help them secure employment and develop a support base (whether that is through his or her church/mosque/synagogue, family, friends, etc.) Chances are, there's a legal process to be dealt with in cases like this and they need to be followed by both you and the prisoner. However, use your head and don't land in a bad situation or one that will land the prisoner back in jail.

DON'TS

Do not make promises. Many well-meaning people write letters offering support to a prisoner, or make offers for help out of goodwill.

Unfortunately, many never follow through and this can build false hope in a prisoner. This is not fair to them. If you're writing, don't make promises. Don't offer to do a support campaign if you can't make that time. Don't offer to send items when you can't afford it. Be honest. It's best to start writing and keep it that way, at least until a relationship is established.

Do not romanticize prisons or prisoners. Many activists have ideas about who prisoners are, why they're locked up, the system, etc. While it's correct to have political clarity about incarceration and the nature of the criminal justice system, it is not correct to romanticize a prisoner, anything they might be locked up for (especially a "social crime"), or their lives. They're people just like you, and have strengths and weaknesses. It is dangerous to assume that anyone (free or jailed) is able to overcome all of their personal weaknesses, or be completely truthful, or that they are not dealing with the stressful situation they're in in negative ways. Some are estranged from their families as a direct result of their own actions. Some may have learned manipulative behaviors over the years. Prisoners are people like you.

Do not discuss illegal political action with a prisoner. Again, this is for your security and theirs. Prisoners can be and have been implicated for outside action that violates the law and you should be mindful that if authorities even find such information in the hands of prisoners, prisoners can face added time and harsh treatment.

Do not attempt to place political judgments on prisoners' experiences. Some prisoners, out of desperation, write publications to get pen pals and may not agree completely with the views of the paper, but read it for information. Some prisoners have been converted to Christianity or Islam. Some have views that may seem somewhat backward. Rather than attack a prisoner, it's best to be polite but firm if there's something you'd rather not discuss or find objectionable. Do

not attack or insult a prisoner because of religion, personal preferences or experiences. If the prisoner declares him- or herself to be a white supremacist, you are well within your rights to explain your disagreements, encourage them to reconsider their views and discontinue the relationship; please be aware that several white supremacist gangs have ties

to the outside from prison and it is smart not to get into insults or threats against such prisoners. Don't send literature unless requested and be aware you don't have to go along with every request.

(The above information related to writing to prisoners was provided by the Anarchist Black Cross Network)

CURRENT POWs

Please see **AmericansForSafeaccess.org/pows** for more information on contacting current prisoners, as some are moved frequently.