

Advice for Corresponding with Texas Death Row Prisoners

Updated by the Peace and Social Concerns Committee, Friends Meeting of Austin Texas

Here you will find some tips about pen friendships with death row prisoners. Please read this advice. If you still have questions afterwards, please contact a committee member or come to a committee meeting for that purpose.

Is this right for me?

Writing to prisoners on death row is often a rewarding experience. It is an opportunity to get to know someone well who has had very different life experiences, who has different points of view, who is dealing with life in prison which has challenges that we on the outside don't have to deal with, who is facing being punished by the State most severely. This experience can have the benefit of helping us to be more compassionate, more understanding and more loving.

Before writing a letter to someone on death row, think carefully about it. Why? Pen pals mean a lot to prisoners. They look for long-lasting friendships. They don't look for someone who will write one or two letters and then disappear.

Many prisoners have very little if any support. Their families and friends sometimes desert them. Society shuns them. It is, therefore, possible to get into a close relationship with a prisoner amazingly quickly. This can create problems; for instance, male prisoners can sometimes, try to elevate the relationship with a female pen pal into something very special.

Problems also arise because many of the prisoners have challenges, either because of the stresses of Death Row, or because of trauma in their earlier lives. Many have been on drugs and suffered violence and abuse as children.

The correspondence can become demanding. Some write every day. Once a week is common. If you know in advance that you will be unable to write very frequently, it can be a good idea to make this clear at the outset. That way, disappointment can be avoided. You can, for example, suggest that you write only in reply to each other's letters. This ping-pong arrangement means you will be writing at most once a fortnight/month.

If you have any concerns once you begin writing, members of the committee will be happy to listen and help as best we can.

Some prisoners fail to reply to the first letter. It is also not uncommon for a prisoner to stop writing, or for there to be long gaps. It is very difficult writing to a vacuum, but in some cases those unwilling or unable to reply are the neediest of all.

How do I start writing?

Begin by contacting the committee regarding prisoners who are seeking pen pals. Don't be hurt if your initial letter does not receive an immediate response. Sometimes it takes a little while for prisoners to be comfortable writing. The prison mail system can also be exceedingly slow.

Occasionally, prisoners will not respond. Life on death row is difficult, and prisoners often go through periods of depression. If a prisoner does not respond after three letters, you may want to consider another pen pal. Their decision not to write is not a reflection on you or your letters; it is often a warning sign that a prisoner is going through a difficult time.

The Logistics of Writing

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) has rules and regulations about what can and cannot be sent into the prisons. Only letters and photographs may be mailed directly to prisoners. **All letters are opened by a corrections officer, and may be copied and saved by prison officials.** Books and periodicals must be mailed directly to the prisoner from the bookstore, publisher or website. Further information about mail may be found by a web search of "TDCJ Inspect 2 Protect," which includes new rules beginning March 1, 2020. Restrictions include:

- Prisoners will only be allowed to receive mail from general correspondents on standard white paper. Mail received on colored, decorated, card stock, construction, linen, or cotton paper will be denied.
- Letters sent to prisoners may not contain uninspectable substances such as perfume, stickers, lipstick, bodily fluid, powdery substances or artwork using paint, glitter, glue, or tape.
- There is no restriction on the length of incoming or outgoing correspondence; however, a limit of 10 photos will be allowed per envelope.

The mailing address for men:

[Name of prisoner]
[#]

Polunsky Unit
3872 FM 350 South
Livingston, TX 77351

The mailing address for women:

[Name of prisoner]
[#]
Mountain View Unit
2305 Ransom Road
Gatesville, TX 76528

Your return address may be your own or you may use the Meeting's address:

[Your name]
Friends Meeting of Austin
3701 E. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
Austin, TX 78721-1138

The JPay.com email service is another way of corresponding. JPay allows you to send an email to your pen pal which – Sunday through Thursday – will be received within 24-48 hours. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday emails are delivered the next week. A printout of your email is generally delivered to the resident around 10 a.m. The prisoner, however, does not have access at all to telephone or email and will only be able to contact you through regular mail.

What do I write about?

Quakers believe that there is that of God in every one, and each one of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done. We strongly recommend that you inform yourself about the criminal case of the prisoner you are writing. Some of us are skilled at researching cases and would be glad to help you learn about the case if you need assistance.

When you decide to write to a prisoner, begin slowly. Don't ask private questions in your first letters. A closer relationship based on trust has to be built first. Talk about yourself and about your hobbies in the beginning. You can ask the prisoner how they feel at the moment and about their daily life. Give them the feeling that you are willing to speak about everything with them (except their case). This is important for good communication.

Never correspond with a prisoner about the facts of the crime. If you do, you may be creating a record that could kill your new friend on retrial. Never ask questions about the case. Maintain confidentiality. Don't share information with a prisoner about another prisoner.

Many prisoners claim to be innocent in their letters. There are innocent people on death row, there's no question about it. But there are also many people who are guilty of the crimes they were sentenced for. Innocence or guilt does not change the fact that the death penalty is wrong. The death penalty is, in each and every case, arbitrary and unjust.

If your pen pal brings up the question of guilt and innocence, remind them that you are not a lawyer. Encourage them to discuss their case with their lawyer. Feel free to contact the committee if this occurs with your pen pal. We will be happy to research available resources for legal assistance.

If at any time you decide to stop correspondence, please consider providing an explanation to your pen pal. The committee can help you draft such a message.

A few words about money:

If you agree to be on a prisoner's visitation list, you will eventually be faced with decisions to make regarding money. Only senders that are on the approved visitor list or telephone list will be allowed to deposit money to prisoners.

Many prisoners ask for money. You should know that most people on death row have no income. They have to buy hygiene articles as well as paper, envelopes and stamps to write.

It is understandable that a prisoner also wants a snack from time to time or would like to have a radio. This is how they stay in touch with the free world. All death row prisoners in Texas spend 23 hours a day alone in their cell.

But it is important to be careful regarding money. A small amount now and then may be ok, if you can afford it. If not, don't hesitate to tell the prisoner. Some of us on the committee do send money and some of us do not. If you are eligible to send money, there are a variety of ways to do it. The committee would be happy to help advise.

Please contact a member of the Peace and Social Concerns Committee of the Friends Meeting of Austin if your pen pal receives an execution date. If a prisoner is executed, the correspondence may be donated with the prisoner's permission to the University of Texas.

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