

Advice for Corresponding with People Incarcerated on Texas Death Row

Updated by Friends Meeting of Austin (Texas) - Peace and Social Concern Committee

This document provides some tips about pen friendships with people incarcerated on death row (DR). If you still have questions after reading, please contact a committee member.

Note: Language is important. Using language which focuses people first and people over status is aligned with Quaker testimonies. Please refer to this article from the Marshall Project:

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2021/04/12/what-words-we-use-and-avoid-when-covering-people-and-incarceration>

Is this right for me?

Writing to someone on death row is often a rewarding experience.

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

Many people on death row 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 quickly with someone who is incarcerated. This can be rewarding, but can sometimes create problems; for instance, males who are incarcerated may sometimes try to elevate the relationship with a female pen pal towards a relationship that might feel uncomfortable. Problems may also arise because many people on death row have challenges, either because of the stresses of life on death row, and/or because of trauma in their earlier lives.

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.

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 people on death row fail to reply to the first letter. It is also not uncommon for them to stop writing, or for there to be long gaps. It is very difficult

writing into a vacuum, but in some cases those unwilling or unable to reply are the neediest of all.

How do I start writing?

Begin by asking the committee if there are known people on death row seeking pen pals. You can use the postal mail system or the Securus app to correspond with your potential pen pal. Don't be hurt if you don't receive a quick response to your initial correspondence. Sometimes it takes a little while for people to be comfortable writing back. Plus, the prison mail system is slow. E-messaging through the Securus app is generally quicker, but can still take several days or longer.

Occasionally, people on death row will not respond. Life on death row is difficult, and people incarcerated on death row often go through periods of depression. Their decision not to write is not a reflection on you or your letters; it is often a warning sign that the person is going through a difficult time.

The Logistics of Writing

As of July 2023, men and women on death row in Texas no longer receive personal mail directly from family or friends. This includes greeting cards and photos. In lieu of physical mail, TDCJ has implemented the "Inmate Digital Mail" system. Postal mail is scanned and delivered to the person via their tablet. There are many restrictions concerning incoming mail for persons on death row. Here is a link to the TDCJ Correspondence Rules: <https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/documents/policy/BP0391.pdf>.

If questions arise, a committee member can help.

The postal mailing address for your friend on death row must appear as shown below:

Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Inmate's Full First and Last Name + TDCJ#
P.O. Box 660400
Dallas, TX 75266-0400

Your return address may be your own OR you may use the Meetinghouse address:

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

With the introduction of Securus and "e-messaging," correspondence may become quicker and easier for those comfortable with the program, but perhaps less so for people less comfortable with technology. Consider discussing the method of correspondence early in a friendship. If you need help with Securus, a committee member can help.

Tablets

Most of our friends on death row now have tablets. However, limited features are available to them. The e-messaging feature is available and allows our pen pals to communicate with friends and family via an email-like feature. E-messages require virtual 'stamps' which must be purchased. You can purchase stamps for your pen pal as well. All e-messages are screened, and delivery may take 48 hours or more. A Securus account is required to use this feature. Additional features may come in the future. Learn more and sign up at the link below. A committee member familiar with Securus can help you set up your account if necessary:

<https://securustech.online/#/login>

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 recommend that you inform yourself about your new friend's criminal case. If you need help researching case history, please ask a committee member.

When you first write to your pen pal on death row, 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 your friend 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.

Do not correspond with your friend about the facts of the crime. If you do, you may be creating a record that could be used against your friend on retrial. Don't ask questions about the case. Maintain confidentiality. Don't share information about one incarcerated person with another incarcerated person.

Many people on death row 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 corresponding, 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 your friend's visitation list, you may 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 people on death row.

Many pen pals ask for money. 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 people on death row also want a snack from time to time or would like to have a radio. This is how they stay in touch with the free world. People on death row in Texas typically 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 your pen pal. Some of us on the committee do send money and some of us do not. If you wish to send money, it may be done through the Securus app.

Please contact a member of the Death Penalty Group or the Peace and Social Concerns committee at the Friends Meeting of Austin if your pen pal receives an execution date. If you would like a support group set up, Care and Council can facilitate. Also, with permission obtained prior to their execution, correspondence between you and your friend may be archived through various agencies such as University of Texas or Texas After Violence Project.
<https://texasafterviolence.org/>

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