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Writing to Immigrants in Detention

Living inside of an immigration detention center isn't easy. Some people have said they feel lonely, confused, bored, and afraid. Being separated from family, friends, and all that is familiar is stressful. Being treated like a prisoner, while awaiting an unknown outcome, can take a tremendous psychological toll. Some—like the men being held in these facilities—do not even have a chance go outside. Often the food is unfamiliar, bland, and limited. Phone calls cost several dollars a minute, and therefore, are out of reach financially for many.

Your letter can be solace, encouragement, and a very real connection to the outside world in the midst of this difficult time in someone's life. When we write to men and women being detained, we are making a human connection across the walls and barbed wire. We are honoring the dignity of every human being—something not always done inside the centers. Your letter also sends a message to the person receiving it and the others around him or her that someone knows they are there. They are not alone. They have support. Some people have said that guards treat them better when they receive letters and visitors.

As your letter will mean so much to many of the people to whom you write, here are a few things to understand before you make a commitment to write to those being detained:

- **We write as friends.** We are not writing as lawyers, doctors, or social workers. We are one human connecting with another human being in solidarity as we seek to honor the dignity of all. Do not attempt to give legal advice.
- **Keep your promises.** Don't make commitments you can't keep. If you say you will write to someone, you must. Your letter means so much more than most of us can possibly imagine. You may not be able or willing to do what someone asks of you—call family, send money, etc. That is okay. Know your own boundaries. And talk with a facilitator of the writing project when questions arise.
- **Do not take away someone's power.** While they may be in a temporarily vulnerable position, many immigrant men and women in detention centers are some of the most courageous, intelligent, gifted, resourceful people you may have the privilege of meeting. Do not romanticize them as the "detainee" or victimize them to the point of taking power away from them. Many have been successful business people, survived horrendous situations due to their own resourcefulness, traveled the world to arrive here, learned to speak several languages, attended university, and been leaders in their families, towns and schools.

- **Be aware of your own power.** You have more “power” than detained immigrants due to your freedom and status in this country. Be careful to not abuse the power difference. And never do for someone what he or she can do for themselves.
- **Keep in mind your letters may be read by a guard.** Be tactful and conscious. For example, if you talk about immigration or the detention system with anger or disgust, it may be the detainee that will be the one who will suffer from your words, not you. We are here to be compassionate friends and to love everyone.
- **Be sensitive** to the fact that the person reading your letter may be inferring messages differently than you imply due to their current circumstances. Loneliness, power differences, and language differences could play into the person being detained misunderstanding you or feeling more intimately connected to you than you intend.
- **We have a strict no-proselytizing policy.** It is not appropriate to try to convert anyone to your religion. It is important to give the detained immigrant the power to guide the conversation. If they bring up religion, then you may discuss the topic on their terms. Be careful to never make it seem like participating in a certain religion is necessary to receive letters from you. Keep in mind that it could be members of your religion that persecuted them in their home country. It is sometimes religious persecution that has caused someone to flee his or her home; so, religion in general may be a complex and painful topic. Some people may have faced death due to their beliefs, making it even more inappropriate to try to convince them to adopt your religious beliefs. All that said, if the person finds strength from their faith, it is appropriate to encourage them in their own faith. This may mean Christians mail Muslim prayers or poems to someone to whom they are writing. Even if you are not a person of faith, if religion is important to the person with whom you are in contact, you may want to ask for instance how their faith is sustaining them. Just remember that you are a friend there to uplift detained individuals through their own beliefs, not as a proselytizer seeking to convert.
- **We fully support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and inter-sex people.** Some people have fled their country because of attempts on their life due to their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. We do not believe that being LGBTI is a sin and will never attempt to change anyone. We go far beyond tolerance. We celebrate the gifts of LGBT people.

Talk about your questions or concerns as they come up. Please call us at (908) 965-0455 or email rstantana@firstfriendsnjny.org. **We are here to support you.**

WHAT TO WRITE

At first, writing to a stranger can feel intimidating. What do I say? How do I introduce myself? What if they don't respond? Craft a message from the heart and mail it with an open mind.

Ideas to keep in mind as you write to detainees:

- **Introduce yourself and state why you are writing:**

"First Friends gave me your name and I will be writing to you as a pen pal."

- **You may want to talk about yourself and your life** in the United States (i.e. family, job, and physical environment), current events, television or sports (they are especially starved for newspaper articles from their countries-both news items and sports are welcomed), interesting cultural traditions in the U.S.
- **You may want to ask about life** in the detainee's country and life in the detention center.
- **Know your boundaries** and set ground rules. Remember you are not an attorney, social worker or counselor. You are a friend that cares.
- **All information that the detainees share is considered confidential.**
- **Always include** the detainees 'A' number on all correspondence: EG. Malik Smith #999999999 and Jail ID 282533 (For Hudson County or E-12345 for Bergen)

The mailing address is:

Detainee's Name
'A' number OR Jail ID number
C/O "FACILITY NAME"
Address of the Facility

Important Suggestions:

- *We suggest for your privacy to use First Friends address as a return address. We will forward all correspondence to and from you.*
- Let us know about returned letters because the detainee is no longer there so we may assign you a new pen pal.
- Do not send loose stamps or stamped envelopes. They are considered CONTRABAND.
- Generally, First Friends does not recommend giving money to detainees. However, if you feel it is appropriate to provide a modest sum, **do not mail checks or cash**. Contact First Friends at 908-965-0455 and we will help you.

THE ROLE OF A PEN-PAL

As a volunteer pen pal, your letters provide:

- A boost to the morale of a detainee through friendship.
- A time when detainees can relax and correspond with someone.
- A sense that someone outside of the official world of detention knows and cares about "me."
- A way to discuss cultural differences or incidents that occur in detention.
- A help to FIRST FRIENDS by reading about detainee problems and, when appropriate, calling the office to discuss what you learned.
- An opportunity to learn about the legal process asylum seekers face and about other cultures and countries.

THE CARDINAL RULE

For all who work in refugee assistance, from lawyers and social workers to asylum seekers themselves, confidentiality is important. Many asylum seekers fear for their own lives or the lives of their family members whom they left behind. They are also painfully aware of what might happen if word gets out (especially to their home country) that they are seeking asylum in the US. Asylum seekers may also be very sensitive about personal details from their experience. Only they should decide with whom to share this information.

As a volunteer with First Friends, your behavior can affect the reputation of the whole group. Therefore, it is important for you to maintain the confidentiality of the person you visit in immigration detention.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind.

Always maintain the confidentiality of your conversation with the detainee, unless instructed otherwise by the detainee or if the detainee says something indicating that he/she might be a danger to himself/herself or to others (at that point you should call the First Friends Coordinator).

If you tell other people about the experience of visiting, use pseudonyms (i.e. 'Rose' or 'Frank') and only speak in general terms about the detainee's story. Identifying details should not be discussed (i.e. The man from Madagascar who was a journalist and came here as a stowaway....).

As a volunteer with First Friends, you may share any concerns or questions with our office. Together we will maintain the confidentiality of the detainee 'within the organization'. However, it is preferable that you not discuss confidential matters with other volunteers. You can seek support from other volunteers on general concerns you encounter.

ISSUES THAT SHOULD BE REFERRED TO FIRST FRIENDS

Please call FIRST FRIENDS with any concerns you encounter, such as the following:

- **Legal matters:** (upcoming court dates, need for a lawyer, filing appeals, etc.) We can answer questions about the process but cannot give opinions or secure legal assistance.
- **Mental and physical health concerns:** depression, suicidal symptoms, prolonged illness, sudden weight loss, etc. Urge the detainee to file a written request for medical attention. It would be good to share your concerns with FIRST FRIENDS for the record.
- **Urgent detainee needs:** contact with family, immediate or impending release.
- **Allegations of mistreatment or abuse of a detainee inside the facility.** If the detainee makes allegations, note the time, place, a brief description of what happened with as much detail as possible. Call FIRST FRIENDS quickly and let us follow up. Encourage detainee to file a grievance report.
- **Unprofessional conduct of detention center/county jail staff**
- **Volunteer may realize he/she is not a good match for detainee,** First Friends Coordinator will provide you a new detainee

STAYING WITHIN BOUNDARIES

What are Personal Boundaries?

- **Physical Boundaries:** refers to personal space and physical touch. Be aware of what's appropriate and what's not.
- **Intellectual Boundaries:** refers to thoughts and ideas. Please respect others' ideas and be aware of appropriate discussion. This boundary can be violated when someone is dismissive or belittles another person's thoughts or ideas.
- **Emotional Boundaries:** refers to a person's feelings. Create a limitation on what to share or what not to share. Do not criticize, belittle or invalidate another person's feelings.

Know your boundaries and limits regarding which needs you can meet and which ones you cannot:

- It is important to learn to distinguish what volunteers can and cannot do regarding supporting someone in their immigration case. It is **NOT APPROPRIATE TO CONTACT THE DETAINED FRIEND'S ATTORNEY.** If there appears to be a problem with communication or the quality of representation, please instruct your detained friend to contact First Friends. There should be a poster in each dormitory which has a toll-free code to call First Friends.
- Do not contact the embassy or consulate of the person in detention unless asked to. For example, asylum seekers are fleeing a country where their government persecuted them or where the government could not or would not protect them. They may not want someone to inform their governments that they are in U.S. detention. Similarly, do not contact local expatriates from the detained immigrant's home country without being asked to.
- Throughout the week, people in detention have authority figures telling them what to do, when to do it, and where to be. Ensure that you, as a pen-pal, do not become another negative authority figure.

YOUR CORRESPONDENCE MAKES A DIFFERENCE!

Thank you for taking the time to build a hopeful, encouraging, human connection through letter writing to individuals in immigration detention. You are part of building a human network of hope, solidarity, and tangible support. Honoring the dignity of every human being is the foundation for this lifeline of hope. Your participation in First Friends means a great deal to detainees. You are showing them that they are not forgotten which in turn is a tremendous boost to their morale. Thank you and please keep in touch!

Additional Resources

To learn more about detention:

www.firstfriendsnjny.org

www.detentionwatchnetwork.org

www.rightsworkinggroup.org

www.nationalimmigrationproject.org



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