



# California Coalition for Women Prisoners

## How To: Letter Writing to Prisoners

### Goals of letter writing to prisoners

- To strengthen CCWP's connection with incarcerated women and transgender people and to strengthen the movement by collecting information which guides our movement;
- To promote incarcerated women's leadership by responding to requests for information and ideas for organizational activities, and by soliciting their input;
- To connect incarcerated women with resources, information, and support;
- To break down the isolation that people in prison sometimes feel – especially women whose families may have abandoned them;
- To help us track upcoming parole suitability hearings, monitor conditions within the prisons, and stay informed about other relevant issues; and
- To express our solidarity with female and transgender women and girls.

### Values that guide our responses to incarcerated survivors

- CCWP considers correspondence with incarcerated women to be a critical part of building a movement to free women from prison.
- We work in solidarity with incarcerated women. Solidarity is defined by Sharon Martinas as "an act of bonding with people struggling for their liberation."
- We offer non-judgmental support from a social justice, prisoner/survivor empowerment perspective.
- We encourage responses that offer validation, support, and encouragement;
- We believe that incarcerated women are the experts in their own lives – those of us who haven't been there are not the experts.
- We recognize that the violence and control used by prison staff and prison policies against women and transgender people in prison mirror the abuse that many may have experienced from their abusive partners (this means that CCWP does not consider acts of abuse by prison staff as isolated acts, but instead they are a part of a system designed to control and oppress people in prison, especially people of color, immigrants, and poor people).
- We are in solidarity with and support the rights of all people in prison and formerly incarcerated people. We do not support "divide and conquer" strategies used by the prison or other groups that try to frame survivors of domestic violence (or people serving sentences for non-violent crimes, or other categories of people) as "good" prisoners in comparison with "other" prisoners who are "bad" prisoners or ones who "deserve" to be incarcerated.

## Other things to keep in mind when writing letters to people in prison

- It is important to keep the information you read in letters from incarcerated individuals confidential. It's ok to discuss the letter with CCWP staff or members, but not with others outside of CCWP.
- It's crucial that you don't make commitments or promises that you or CCWP are not able to follow through with.
- CCWP is not a legal services organization and cannot give legal advice. Please do not give any legal advice. If you have questions, please ask CCWP staff.
- Keep in mind the mixed literacy levels among people and try to respond appropriately.
- Remember that letters will be opened by prison staff so be careful not to include information that may be harmful to the person you are writing to.
- Correspondence through CCWP is aimed at providing support and resources. If you want to develop a pen-pal relationship with someone in prison, you are welcome to do so outside of official CCWP communication. This also applies to personal, social visits.
- Please do not take mail out of the office. You can make arrangements with CCWP staff to come into the office at other times during the week if you would like to devote time to responding to letters.
- We keep track of everyone who writes to us in a database, so please keep the envelope with the letter so we can be sure we have the latest housing information for people on our mailing list or for new people.
- If you have any questions, please ask CCWP staff.

## Types of letters we receive

CCWP receives letters from women, men, and transgender people inside prisons in California and throughout the United States. Occasionally, we receive mail from people on the outside, including formerly incarcerated people, family members of people inside, allies, or donors. Our priority is responding to women and transgender people currently or formerly incarcerated in CA, including transgender women currently or formerly incarcerated in men's institutions in CA.

We categorize the letters we receive from inside into the following categories:

1. General information/Add to The Fire Inside
2. Transgender Resource Request
3. Medical Advocacy
4. Legal Advocacy
5. Child Custody/Family Law
6. Visiting Team Request
7. Parole Advocacy Request (Handled by a separate team of volunteers)
8. Priority/Specific Recipient (women who we visit, people in need of parole support letters, and any letter from a woman/transgender person in CA prisons with a time-sensitive issue.)