

Tips for Working with Prisoners for Advocates

Although in many respects working with prisoners is similar to working with survivors in the community, the prison environment poses unique challenges. Advocates working with prisoners should be respectful while also understanding that the dynamics of providing services with an incarcerated survivor are different, and that there are legitimate safety and security concerns involved for the advocate and for the facility. It can be intimidating to work with and go into correctional facilities. These tips are meant to help you navigate this complex system.

General:

- If possible, make sure you know the prisoner's name and inmate number. You will need their inmate number to write them letters or to request a visit. If they are housed in a Department of Public Safety and Correctional Service (DPSCS) facility, you can look up an inmate's location and ID number on the DPSCS website. <http://www.dpscs.state.md.us/inmate/>
- Prison and jails have their own culture and terms. If you're not sure what something means, ask.
- When introducing yourself for the first time to a prisoner, identify yourself by your first name only and the pronouns you prefer. Provide a space for the inmate to share their preferred name and pronouns.
- Do not agree to pass along information, contact third parties, or do "favors" for a prisoner. This includes something as small as lending an inmate your pen.
- Do not ask why someone is incarcerated. Focus on victimization, not the reasons for their incarceration.

Visits:

- Be aware of facility policies. Usually, you can look up dress codes and other regulations online. Before your visit, research what you must bring and what you should leave at home.
- Have a point person at the facility to go to with questions. This could be a PREA compliance manager, security staff, or someone in administration.

Mail:

- Mail is frequently a lifeline for prisoners. They often don't have other ways to communicate and will appreciate any response sent, even if it is a letter explaining that you can't provide the service they are requesting.
- Don't use your full legal name or signature in communications with inmates – much like you might give only a first name to hotline callers. Prisoners with few resources may latch on to any communication that they receive. It is important they focus on the message of recovery, not on learning more about the advocate.
- Make sure to establish and use a confidential mail protocol to help maintain the confidentiality of inmates you are working with.

Phones:

- Phones may be in public spaces with limited privacy. Ask callers if it is safe to talk. If they indicate they are uncomfortable, try to ask yes or no questions. Make suggestions and ask if any of those are something the caller is comfortable with. If your agency provides in person visits, ask if they would like a confidential in-person visit to follow up.