



# Solidarity in Action

A GUIDE TO VISITING INCARCERATED COMMUNITY MEMBERS

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A Guide to Visiting Incarcerated Community Members



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2017

SYLVIA RIVERA  LAW PROJECT

*The Sylvia Rivera Law Project works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence.*

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# Table of Contents

## I. About this Guide

## II. Communication Prior to a Visit

- a. Establish and maintain communication via letters or phone calls prior to your visit, if possible 8
- b. What if I am initiating contact for the first time as a pen pal or volunteer visitor? 9
- c. What if I am writing to someone whose legal name differs from their preferred name? 10
- d. Key points to raise prior to a visit 11

## III. Self-Care Before Making a Prison Visit

- a. How can I mentally prepare myself for a visit? 14
  - i. Learn about prison conditions 14
  - ii. Be realistic about emotions that may be triggered in prison 15
  - iii. Use the buddy system 15
  - iv. Take care of your physical needs 16
  - v. Understand time constraints and conditions 16

## IV. Self-Care During a Prison Visit

- a. Stay in touch with the person's needs around the visit 17
- b. Maintain personal boundaries 17
- c. Maintain composure when interacting with prison staff 18

## V. After the Visit

- a. How can I care for myself after the visit? 21
  - i. Advocate for incarcerated individuals! 21

## VI. Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Visiting Procedures

- a. How can I find information about people I am visiting online? 22
- b. Do I need to be on a list to visit? 23
- c. What are my rights as a visitor? 25
- d. Are prisons and other facilities accessible for people with disabilities? 25
- e. When can I visit? 26
- f. How long will it take to visit? 27
- g. What if I do not drive? 27
- h. What kind of identification do I need? 28
- i. What if I am undocumented or my status is no longer current? 28
- j. What if I am on parole or another form of state supervision? 30
- k. What should I wear to a visit? 30
- l. What items are prohibited? 34
- m. What if I take medication? 36
- n. What if I want to bring children? 36
- o. Will I get searched? 37
- p. What will the search consist of? 38
- q. Will I be strip-searched? 38
- r. What if I'd like to file a complaint in connection to a visit? 39

## VII. What If I Can't Visit? 41

## VIII. Conclusion 42

## IX. Resources 43

## X. Acknowledgments 44

## About this Guide

*“But until my community is allowed the respect to march in the front, I will go march with my community because that’s where I’m needed and that’s where I belong”*

- Sylvia Rivera, “History is a Weapon”

This visit guide was put together by members of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP). SRLP works to improve access to respectful and affirming social, health, and legal services for low-income people and people of color who are transgender, gender non-conforming, or intersex (TGNCI). Working with people in prison has been a priority of SRLP since its start because our communities are heavily policed, our lives are criminalized and, as a result, TGNCI people are disproportionately represented in prisons and jails. Through SRLP’s Prisoner Justice Project, we work to ensure that our incarcerated community members have access to basic means of survival and safety from violence. One of the Prisoner Justice Project’s main goals is to keep incarcerated community members connected to community members on the outside.

We wrote this guide after visiting prisons ourselves as TGNCI people, after hearing the stories of TGNCI visitors, and speaking to Prisoner Advisory Committee (PAC) members about how their visitors are treated. We do, however, hope that this guide will be applicable to visitors of all gender identities. Whether you are visiting a prison as a family member, lover, friend, activist, social worker, lawyer, volunteer visitor, or in any other capacity, your communication with an incarcerated person has an important role and tremendous impact. We hope that this guide is accessible to as many people as possible.

An important thing to note, however, in using this guide is that we are writing about visiting someone in **prison** and not in any of the other facilities that governments place our communities in. We hope to provide information on jails, psychiatric hospitals, detention centers, and other facilities in future versions of this guide. For now, however, please know that this guide is specific to someone who is in **prison**. This means that the person has already been sentenced and that they are serving time of one year or more.

As some of you may know from experience, having ongoing contact with a family member, friend, volunteer visitor, pen pal, or someone committed to fighting for justice has a deep and sustaining impact. Unfortunately, many people in prison and jail do not receive any letters or visits because of the ways in which the prison system is designed to keep people on the inside separate from people on the outside. People in prison often report being without someone to talk to, someone who is non-judgmental, someone who stays in touch, and someone who provides support without making promises they cannot keep. One way to nurture practices around abolition is to support people in prison by establishing and maintaining contact through letter writing and visiting. With this guide, we hope that by highlighting some of the barriers set up to keep us out and keep us apart, we might facilitate more visits, support each other through state violence and trauma, and utilize our love for one another to help break down this horrible system.

— Juana Paola Peralta, Stefanie Rivera, and Mik Kinkead  
Sylvia Rivera Law Project  
Spring 2017

*"As a PAC member, I deeply feel that the prison visit guide will be a very important thing and visits to those of us on the inside are very seriously important for our well-being – keeping in touch with family and friends."*

— Xena, Woodbourne Correctional Facility



## Communication Prior to a Visit

***Establish and maintain communication via letters or phone calls prior to your visit, if possible.***

If you are writing to someone with whom you already have an established relationship, it is important to acknowledge the feelings you may have around this person's incarceration. When our friends, family, colleagues, and community members are detained by the state, it takes away feelings of safety, comfort, emotional and financial security, community stability, and general collective resistance to state violence. Let yourself feel the sadness, confusion, disappointment, frustration, and any other emotions related to incarceration. Seek support from other friends, family members, a therapist or counselor, community health centers, community organizations, and other support services in your community. Unresolved or unexplored feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion can negatively affect the tone set in your communication. Assess the tone of your letters to ensure that you are not speaking down to, discriminating against, or shaming the incarcerated individual to whom you are writing. Make sure you are not asking your loved one on the inside to respond to or be responsible for your reactions to their everyday reality. This is sometimes called asking others to "hold emotions" and it refers to unfairly placing the burden of unpacking systems of oppression on the person who is actually most affected by these systems.

Be sure to look up the local guidelines for what is acceptable to send and receive over mail. Often times, more artistic or

crafty letters containing glue, glitter, stickers, etc. are not allowed. Excellent resources on letter writing and other aspects of prison and jail support can be found on the website for Black and Pink. We highly recommend their Pen Pal Guidelines.

***What if I am initiating contact for the first time as a pen pal or volunteer visitor?***

If you are making a decision to initiate contact with someone who is incarcerated with whom you do not have a relationship already, you should ask yourself: why do I want to correspond with or visit someone in prison? It's really important that we all take some time to ask ourselves what we want to get out of this relationship. It is absolutely okay to not have a complete answer, but it is good to ask yourself what your motivations are. We all carry assumptions and need to continuously challenge them in all our work and engagement with others. Ask yourself what assumptions you might have about people who are incarcerated and how that might impact the way you write or what you bring to your interactions with a prospective pen pal or visitor relationship. Hopefully you are making contact with the intention of building relationships since our struggles as people of color, activists, sex workers, youth workers, immigrants, trans, queer, and gender-non-conforming people are intricately connected with prison abolition and prisoner liberation. Please be conscious and aware of power dynamics and actively seek support for the acknowledgment and elimination of these dynamics in your visits and/or correspondence.

Remember to be transparent about your own ability to disclose any personal information about yourself, such as immigrant status, age, history of incarceration, sexual preferences, etc. Think about whether you are comfortable sharing photos or sending occasional checks. These are reasonable and common requests and you should be prepared to answer them. It is completely okay to have boundaries on sending money or sharing personal photos. You can be an ally and still take care of yourself at the same time. Some correspondence may feel flirtatious or sexual or might trigger experiences that you may have dealt with or are currently dealing with, for example: physical, emotional, or sexual violence; or drug and alcohol use. Assess your capacity to hear about the violence that is inherent to the system of incarceration. Communicate your boundaries clearly to the person with whom you are corresponding when you are writing.

*“(A visit) means that whoever is visiting has been thinking about me and has put forth time and effort out of a busy life to show me that they care for me and I’m not alone. That is extremely important to not just myself but other inmates as well, who can at times feel the pressure of such a difficult time. Knowing you have someone on the outside who cares can dramatically affect your growth and actions while serving your time.”*

— De'Antey, Cayuga Correctional Facility

***What if I am writing to someone whose legal name differs***

### ***from their preferred name?***

It is important to find out the prison's guidelines for mail correspondence. Most prisons will reject letters addressed to people who are using a different name than the legal name they are incarcerated under (even if the person's prison identification number is written on the envelope). In some cases, you can address the envelope using the person's first initial and full last name, for example J. Doe. However, some prisons will even reject that mail due to the abbreviated first name. Depending on the state the individual is in, if your mail is rejected, it should be stamped with a reason for refusal and returned to you, but mail is often confiscated and discarded without proper notice. So again, it is important to find out from the prison administration, or the person you are writing to, about how the envelope should be addressed. Additionally, ask the person you are writing to if they want you to use their preferred name and pronouns in your letters. Corrections staff open mail to inspect it for contraband and staff may even read the mail. It is possible that the person you are writing to does not want to risk exposing their trans/queer/LGB/gender non-conforming identity to the mail clerk and other prison staff. Other people may want their legal name on the envelope and preferred name used in the letter. Ask questions before making assumptions about how the person who is incarcerated will want you to address them.

### ***Key points to raise prior to a visit:***

When you are first discussing visiting someone who is incarcerated, it is helpful to be upfront about how often you

will be able to visit. If you will only be able to visit once or twice, it is important to say so. Making prison visits on an ongoing basis can be a serious commitment. In general, we should not set expectations that we are not able to meet. If something comes up that forces you to change or cancel a scheduled visit, it is important to communicate that as soon as possible to the person you are planning to visit.

If you are visiting someone who identifies as trans, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender non-conforming, or intersex, ask them directly whether it is okay to discuss these identities during your visit. For comfort or safety reasons, they may not wish for that information to be publicly shared with staff or other visitors. In some cases, they may tell you to refer to them by a different name or gender pronoun when in the presence of staff. During your visit, be sure to remember and follow any instructions that you may have been given. The same is true for any issues or concerns raised in the letters that may be upsetting or triggering, such as violence or childhood trauma.

Ask whether a contact visit or non-contact visit is preferable. A non-contact visit may mean that the person you are visiting will be spared an invasive strip-search. For trans, gender non-conforming, and intersex people in particular, avoiding such a search may be more important than physical contact with a visitor. Be prepared that if you choose a non-contact visit, you may have a thick Plexiglas barrier between you, you may need to communicate mostly via outdated telephones, or you may have to speak loudly through holes in the Plexiglas. Be aware of any concerns

you or the person you are visiting may have with hearing or participating in such a visit.

Immediately before a visit, make sure that the individual you are visiting is eligible to receive visitors. Sometimes individuals may have scheduled medical trips or be on visit restrictions so be sure to check a few days before.

*It would mean so much to me if more people would come to visit me. Especially if I am upstate. We become both forgotten and isolated in prison and a visit is HUGE! Visits are so important to me because transgender people who are incarcerated are subjected to constant ridicule, violence, harassment, sexual assault and bias behavior. A visit makes you feel love!*

— Kitty, Rikers Island

## **Self-Care Before Making a Prison Visit**

*How can I mentally prepare myself for a visit?*

### ***Learn about prison conditions***

You may have already learned a bit about prison conditions from the person who is incarcerated. Additionally, it can be a good idea to do some research about the particular facility before a visit. Many prisons have family visitation guides or other resources for visitors available online. Look at photos of clothing worn by visitors and incarcerated people. In some instances, pictures of the visitation rooms and cells are also available. Some people find that researching a facility beforehand can be a useful way to reduce some of the shock and sadness that may occur when you visit the facility in person. Organizations sometimes also publish reviews of facilities.

#### ***New York Tip:***

**In New York, The Correctional Association publishes guides and reviews of the correctional facilities in New York State.**

Online forums, such as the Prison Talk Online Community, create a great opportunity for you to connect with other people who have made prison visits. Whether you actively engage with the online community or just read through old posts, many of the typical questions regarding prison conditions and prison visits will be answered via these forums.

For people visiting incarcerated trans, queer, gender non-

conforming, or intersex people, SRLP's publication, *"It's War in Here: A Report on the Treatment of Transgender and Intersex People in New York State Men's Prisons"*, is an important resource. The report documents the common experiences of assault, denial of urgently needed medical care, and placement in gender-inappropriate facilities. Reading this report may help prepare you for some of the trauma you may hear about during your visit.

### ***Be realistic about emotions that may be triggered in a prison***

Encourage yourself to be as realistic and honest as you can about the kinds of emotions that are likely to come up for you during your visit. It is possible to feel shut-down, angry, physically sick, emotionally triggered, and any number of other ways. There is no right or wrong way to feel – and giving yourself permission to engage with your feelings can be an important part of engaging with the prison industrial complex. Taking some time to think about the emotional responses you may have while visiting a prison might make it more possible to manage some of those feelings if they surface during your visit.

### ***Use the buddy system***

If possible, coordinate your visit with someone else. While it can be hard to advocate for yourself, it is often easier to advocate for someone else, and having a buddy along can help ensure you both feel safe and calm. Try to have someone waiting for you outside that you can talk to afterwards in order to decompress from the visit. If someone can't

physically come with you, it can be a good idea to schedule a time to talk with someone after your visit.

### ***Take care of your physical needs***

It isn't always easy to meet physical needs while in a facility and waits can be long. The physical conditions of prison are devastating and it's common for visitors to leave feeling emotionally drained, dehydrated, hungry, and sometimes a little sick. If you can, it can be good to eat a big meal, drink water, use the bathroom, stretch, and take any medications that you need before going in. You may also want to make a plan for how to take care of those needs quickly once you leave.

#### ***New York Tip:***

**There are lockers in every New York State facility to store a few small items. You may want to use this for medication, a non-perishable snack, and water.**

### ***Understand time constraints and conditions***

Each correctional facility has its own rules and guidelines regarding visitation and specific visitation days and times. They will also have time restrictions on the duration of your visit and how often incarcerated individuals can have visitors. Do your research and find out the specific time constraints for the particular facility you will be visiting. Conditions regarding visitation are also specific to each facility. (See Section VI. e. "When can I visit?" on page 26 for more information.)

## Self-Care during a Prison Visit

### ***Stay in touch with a person's needs around the visit.***

People who are incarcerated, like all of us, struggle with many issues but are denied access to resources to help navigate those issues. When you are visiting someone, try to stay in touch with what they need. Try to keep your interactions as positive as possible and maintain a hopeful outlook about the future. Remember that you may not be able to change the situation of someone who is incarcerated, but you can be present for them while you are together. This might mean sitting in silence, reminiscing about a past experience, or talking about something that is happening for the person you are visiting.

Staying positive and present doesn't mean being fake or pretending that someone's problems aren't real. Think about the ways that you support friends who are having a hard time. Don't be afraid to check in with the person you are talking to about what is helpful for them and what they do or don't want to talk about.

### ***Maintain personal boundaries***

If the conversation with the person you are visiting turns to a topic that you have already established as off-limits, don't be afraid to enforce those boundaries with them. Attempt to do so in a gentle manner. Ask the person if they have other people they can talk to about these issues. Try to connect them with resources, including other community members, organizations, or published materials.

### ***Maintain composure when interacting with prison staff***

Remember that prison staff need to abide by the rules the prison imposes on them. Also keep in mind that how you approach them will determine their degree of cooperation. Try to maintain a level of respect with prison staff during your visit. We recognize that this can be incredibly upsetting and challenging, especially when observing staff perpetrating violence against our loved ones. One of the many challenges of prison visits is the reality of the power that the institutional players hold over you and your loved ones.

If someone on the staff is saying that you can't visit the person you came to visit or is treating you badly, use your best judgment in the moment about how to respond. Sometimes it can help to politely ask questions about why they are doing what they are doing. There might be a really good reason or a reason that they can't control — for example, the person you came to visit might have a doctor's appointment or a court appearance that is conflicting. Other times, though, they might not have a good reason. You can try suggesting alternatives, explaining something they misunderstood, asking for more of an explanation or a copy of the rules, or finding out if there is anyone else you can talk to — maybe a sergeant or captain. Remember that it is very risky to do anything that they might take the wrong way or see as aggressive. If things seem like they are getting really bad, it is often safest for you to just be polite as possible, get out of the situation as soon as you can, and file a complaint later or try again another day. (See Section VI. r.: "What if I'd like to file a complaint in connection to



a visit?” on page 39 for more information on this.) If you can remember the name or badge number of the staff, or at least, the time and place where you spoke to them, it can help with complaints or other follow up. If it feels safe to do so, you might want to ask for something in writing documenting the reason for the denial of your visit. This can be helpful when filing a complaint later or even just for your own records, or to share with the person you were planning to visit.

If someone on staff is saying or doing something that you think is disrespectful toward the person you are visiting — like using the wrong pronoun — be very careful to check with the person you are visiting before you do anything about it. If your actions make the staff person angry, they might take it out on the person you’re visiting. The person you’re visiting may want to keep their gender identity private from prison staff or may have decided it’s safer to just not fight about it. If the person does want you to advocate for them, though, and that’s something that you’re willing to do, then feel free! You don’t need to be a lawyer or have any other sort of professional role to speak up. It could make a real difference in how the person is treated. Be sure to follow the prisoner’s guidance on how to go about it and what to ask for, though. Sometimes we may think something is a great idea, but it turns out to hurt our loved ones in ways we never expected.

## After the Visit

### *How can I care for myself after the visit?*

As emphasized throughout this guide, it is important to do this work in community. Seek support after your visit. Plan to discuss the visit with someone and share your experiences while keeping confidential aspects of the visit safe. Allow yourself time to decide whether you will be able to continue making visits. Write down things you may do differently on your next visit, if it would improve your experience or the experience of the person you are visiting.

### *Advocate for people who are incarcerated!*

The prison machine was built to isolate our incarcerated community members. Staying in contact with people while they are inside can be vital for resisting this violence and isolation. Share the experience of your visit with others and encourage them to make visits and write letters to people who are incarcerated. In addition to sharing your story, share the stories of the incarcerated person, if you have their permission. Sharing their stories makes visible the violence that defines the prison industrial complex. Highlighting the voices of incarcerated people is also one way to resist the prison system, which is constantly working to silence them. As individuals connected to people who are incarcerated, we must make efforts to raise the collective consciousness. Bring the realities of detention conditions to the forefront of discussions until our society ceases to be complicit in the continuation of this system of mass incarceration and community fragmentation.

## Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Visiting Procedures

### *How can I find information about people I am visiting online?*

Most states have online search systems that allow you to look for an individual by name and/or identification number. You will need to know what name the individual was sentenced under — this may not be the name by which you know them. Doing an online search for “prisoner lookup” and the name of the State they are in will usually bring you to the correct site. The site should be free to use. We recommend using this lookup service or calling the facility directly if you want to know if the person has been transferred.

#### *New York Tip:*

New York State prisons are operated by the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). DOCCS has an “Offender Lookup” service online at [www.nysdoccslookup.doccs.ny.gov](http://www.nysdoccslookup.doccs.ny.gov). You will be able to locate an individual by name, but having the Department Identification Number (DIN) e.g., 01-A-0000, or date of birth, will provide a quicker and more accurate search.

You may also call DOCCS at 518-457-5000 between 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. with general inquiries about individuals incarcerated in the DOCCS system. You will need to provide the name and date of birth of the person you are inquiring about. Knowing their DIN will make it easier to locate them.

## ***Do I need to be on a list to visit?***

Every state correctional agency and each correctional facility within an agency will have different rules and standards for visits. As a general matter, yes, you must be on the approved visitor list of the person you would like to visit. The following suggestions will help to ensure that your visit entrance will go as smoothly as possible:

1. Complete a visitor application and get approval prior to the visit (there are different forms for each state). To find out more information, inquire online or from the individual you are visiting. Many states have published “Visitor Guides” that contain information on how to



- complete the application or who to call.
2. Be conscious of how long it takes to get approved. Some states take up to 30 days to process a visitor application. Many states will reject applications for:
  - Prior criminal history within one year
    - The facility may run a criminal check — be aware of any outstanding warrants that you may have;
  - Failure to complete form in its entirety: be sure not to leave any sections blank;
  - Any falsehoods on your application;
  - Inability to show a government-issued photo ID
3. Determine if there are different guidelines governing visitation for children. Children do not typically require a separate application. However, if they are not accompanied by a parent or legal guardian, they will need a signed, usually notarized, form authorizing them to participate in the visit. (See Section VI. n. on page 36 for more information about visiting with children.)
4. Determine if there is a cap on the number of people that can be on the visitor list. Typical caps range from 10-18 approved visitors, including children.
5. If you intend to visit multiple people, confirm that you can be on more than one visitor list at a time. Some states limit you to placement on one visitor list at a time, with exceptions made for recognized family members.
6. Always be sure to check with the facility as different rules apply to individuals housed on death row or in solitary confinement, medical wards, or mental health

and observation units.

### ***What are my rights as a visitor?***

You have very few legally enforceable rights as a visitor in a prison. Though no court has ruled that visitation in prison is **not** a constitutional right, all courts that have considered issues related to prison visitation have upheld the state or facility's ability to place restrictions on visitation and/or suspend an individual's visitation privileges indefinitely. The prison can also restrict the time of visit, length of visit, and conditions of visit. Even lawyers do not have the right to full contact with people in prison.

### ***Are prisons and other facilities accessible for people with disabilities?***

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies to visitors as well as to incarcerated people. A reasonable accommodation must be made to allow you to visit. This may include relocating visits to parts of the facility that are more accessible or accommodating a visitor with a service animal. For example, in a Texas case where a visitor was Hard of Hearing, it was suggested that a hearing amplification device be provided or visitation be moved to an available attorney-client booth where there was less noise.

If you are someone who identifies as having a disability, or if you would need interpreters or other forms of access to fully participate in a visit, we recommend contacting the facility you will be visiting prior to your visit to discuss any accessibility. Do not be discouraged if you are denied access. Locate resources in your area and report any

discrimination.

*"At Marcy, my grandmother whom utilizes a wheelchair was subjected to hardship in getting into the van which transports visitors to the Residential Mental Health Unit (RMHU) – because the facility's wheelchair-accessible van was out of order and no replacement was available"*

– Stephen J. Torma, Marcy Correctional Facility

### ***When can I visit?***

Every prison has different visiting hours and specialty housing units may additionally have different hours. For the specific hours, you should check with the individual prison. Be aware that there are restrictions on length of visits, days, and number of visitors. Be aware that in most correctional facilities you cannot leave the prison and return to continue the visit in the same day. There are often limits on how many visitors a prisoner can have in one week and at one time. Some prisons may allow scheduled visits. With advance scheduling, you may be able to visit outside standard visiting hours.

#### ***New York Tip:***

**Some facilities organize visiting days by the last name of the incarcerated person. You should arrive early as you may encounter long lines and waiting.**

Keep in mind that prison facilities have general rights to deny visits if there is an emergency at the facility. This is often called a "lock down." This can feel really hard; planning travel to a facility is hard and probably took a lot of work. Try to remain

calm. There is nothing you can do in these situations if the whole facility is locked down. You may, however, want to call a local prisoner justice resource or legal organization to let them know about the lock down.

If your legally recognized spouse, or in some cases, same-sex partner who is not recognized as a spouse under state law but may be recognized as a spouse under the prison rules, is incarcerated, you may be eligible to have an overnight visit with them in a private location. These visits are often called “family reunion” or trailer visits and are sometimes open to other legally recognized family relationships too, such as visits with your children or parents. They are highly regulated and, even if eligible, you may be denied. Most facilities have an appeals process if you are denied. Individuals in federal prisons are not eligible for such visits, but if your family member is incarcerated in a state prison, you can look into this option.

### ***How long will it take to visit?***

A visit will most likely be an all-day endeavor or longer if you have to travel out of state or across state to get to the facility. You probably should not make any other plans that day. You should get there as early as possible as it may take several hours to even get inside the prison.

### ***What if I do not drive?***

As you may know, many prison facilities are located a great distance from the homes of the people who are inside, making it difficult for visitors to reach them. If you are

having difficulty physically getting to a prison, check with your state to see if there are any bus services from urban settings out to rural prisons. You may also want to visit the website Prison Talk Online Community for tips.

### ***What kind of identification do I need?***

Every correction agency has different identification requirements. You will need one or two state-issued identification(s) to be allowed to visit any prison. Your identification must be current and have your photograph and signature. Typically the following identifications will be acceptable (but you should always call ahead to be sure of the requirements):

- Current driver’s license (any US state/territory)
- School identification (any US state/territory)
- Employment identification (any US state/territory)
- DMV non-driver identification card (any US state/territory)
- Resident alien or permanent resident card issued by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services
- US Passport (and possibly passports from other countries but call ahead of time to make sure)
- NYS benefits identification card (Medicaid/food stamp photo ID aka CBIC card)
- US Armed Services identification
- Consulate-issued or diplomatic identification
- Tribal ID card

### ***What if I am undocumented or my status is no longer current?***

There are always risks to engaging with government officials when you are undocumented or out-of-status, especially in any area with heightened cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement. Presentation of a passport or consular identification from another country can trigger inquiries regarding immigration status. Additionally, it is not uncommon for prisons and jails to perform background checks on

prospective visitors. For this reason, we recommend exercising extreme caution if attempting to enter a prison, jail, or detention facility for purposes of a visit if you do not currently have lawful status under US immigration law.

### ***What if I am on parole or another form of state supervision?***

Most facilities place limits on visits from people who have been incarcerated in the recent past or who are currently under state supervision. Facilities with these restrictions usually enforce them by running a background check on any person who submits a visitor application. However, even if the facility you are visiting does not have a visitor application process, you should inquire beforehand about restrictions on visitors with prior convictions. Sometimes exceptions will be made for family members or other legally recognized relationships.

### ***What should I wear to a visit?***

While every prison is going to have a slightly different dress code, almost all prisons require “conservative” dress and enforce gendered, racialized, and fatphobic dress norms. Some prisons specifically say you cannot wear “gender-inappropriate clothing” but most will not expressly communicate such discriminatory policies. Most facilities have published guidelines that you can find online or by calling the facility. Be aware that these guidelines are often very discretionary, meaning one prison guard may interpret the guidelines very differently than another.



When dressing for a prison visit, it is important to keep in mind that you will be going through a metal detector so be aware of any metal that you have on your clothing, including underwire in bras or other accessories. The metal detectors may be more sensitive than others that you are used to from courts, airports, or other places.

Any dress deemed inappropriate by the prison is grounds for denial of visitation. Some prisons and jails have visitor centers that allow you to borrow approved clothing. However, they do not exist at every prison and keep limited hours. We recommend bringing an extra change of clothing with you in case the outfit you are wearing is deemed inappropriate. At some prisons, you need to wait outside or walk outside for certain units, so bring warm clothes if needed. If you are bringing an extra change of clothing, confirm that lockers will be available at the facility for you to store the additional items. These lockers are often either coin operated or require a credit card for use. Inquire about access to lockers before your visit.

For trans, gender non-conforming, or intersex visitors, be aware that you may be subjected to dress codes based on your assigned sex at birth or the gender listed on your identification. Additionally, by law, you may be subjected to searches by officers before entering the facility. Though it may technically be unlawful, these searches are often performed in a manner designed to be humiliating and in some cases may be performed for the sole purpose of determining your genital characteristics. In dressing for your visit, be aware of the history of violence towards trans,

gender non-conforming, and intersex visitors. Enforcing gendered, racialized, and fatphobic codes of dress and conduct is an example of the racism, homophobia, transphobia, sizeism, and ableism that shapes the entire prison system.

Loose clothing that covers the majority of your body is not only comfortable for the long hours that prison visits take, they also generally conform to dress guidelines. Be sure to check the pockets of any clothing you wear into the prison. Be sure you haven't accidentally left prohibited items in them, such as lighters or cell phones.

Here are a few suggestions for dress given by various prisons:

- Nothing resembling prisoner dress code (check with the individual you are visiting for details)
- Nothing resembling staff dress code; check with the individual you are visiting for details, but this usually includes:
  - No forest green, navy blue, or black dress pants
  - No tan or white dress shirts
  - No camo or army prints
- No clothing with words or images that could be considered offensive
- Must wear undergarments, but NO underwire bras
- Nothing that cannot be taken off or will not clear a metal detector
- No strapless, halter, bare midriffs, exposed breasts, or genitals
- Nothing sheer, transparent, or fishnet

- No hoodies
- No skirts, dresses, or shorts that end more than 2” above the knee
- No shower shoes or flip-flops
- Wigs, hairpieces, and extensions are banned in some facilities and in others are subject to special search (check the prison you are visiting for details). If it is for a medical or religious reason, be sure to bring appropriate documentation
- Every prison restricts jewelry, hair pins, and other metal accessories. Check the specific prison for details, but your safest approach would be not to wear any
- Nothing tight or spandex
- No clothes with holes
- No shoes with wheels
- No visible undergarments
- Pants and skirts must be worn above the waist
- Headgear is typically only allowed for religious reasons
- Try not to wear brand new, unwashed clothes as it may trigger the explosive sensors; likewise, if you tend to carry drugs, alcohol, or medication in your clothing, make sure you have washed your clothes before the visit
- Most prisons will not allow you to wear hats, gloves, or outerwear on a visit even if you need to walk outside for some portion of it
- We recommend not wearing any clothing with messages, especially if those messages are political in nature. Your visit is already a political act

For transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex

visitors, some aspects of how we dress and express ourselves may make it difficult to enter a facility. In general, we have heard reports that non-metallic clothing items, such as cloth binders, padded bras without underwires, and structured underwear without wire do not raise concerns. If your gender expression involves wearing gender-affirming undergarments or accessories that have metal parts or are made of any hard plastic pieces, these items are more likely to set off either the metal detector or raise questions during a pat or wand frisk. It can be useful to have a doctor’s letter explaining that you are wearing a supportive medical garment. Another option would be to reach out to a local organization who works with people in prison and/or TGNCI people in advance of the visit for support.

### ***What items are prohibited?***

Every prison restricts what visitors are allowed to bring into a facility. While you should always check the specific policies of the prison you are visiting, a good general guideline is if you do not absolutely need it, do not bring it. Many facilities do allow you to bring in a certain amount of money in order to buy small snacks from vending machines. It can be a nice surprise to someone on the inside to have a snack with a visit as sometimes visits may mean that the individual misses a meal.

- No guns, including stun guns, zip guns, bullets, or imitation guns and bullets (bringing in contraband could result in being banned from visits or arrest)
- No drugs (if you will need to take medication during a

visit, please see our section below on medication)

- No syringes
- No knives, imitation knives, box cutters, razor blades, hobby blades, scalpels, scissors, brass knuckles, or any other weapons
- No tools
- No metal or glass objects
- No padlocks
- No nail clippers and fingernail files
- No tobacco products and related paraphernalia, including cigarettes, cigars, rolling papers, chewing tobacco, or pipes
- No tape or other adhesives
- No explosive devices
- No matches or lighters
- No electronic devices, including cell phones or phone accessories, personal digital assistants, or portable media devices, including, but not limited to, iPods, iPads, MP3 players, e-readers, pagers, beepers, laptops, cameras, recording devices, or radios (\*unless these electronic devices are needed for ADA access, in which case you should clear them with the facility before visiting)
- No law enforcement badges and equipment
- No liquids and beverages, including water, with exceptions for baby needs
- No gels
- No chapstick
- No metal hairclips or hairpins
- No non-prescription medication
- No sunglasses

- No chewing gum
- Restrictions exist on photographs and documents
- No keys, except typically a single car or locker key
- No food (the facilities often have vending machines)

### ***What if I take medication?***

Experience tells us that if you can avoid bringing medication into a prison, you should. However, if it is medically necessary, you should follow these suggestions and any others put forth by the prison itself:

- You may not bring any non-prescription medication
- You may bring prescription medication if it is in the original container, prescribed to you. You must put it in a locker. You may only bring it on to the facility floor if it is a life-saving medication.
- Most facilities will let you bring in life-saving medications, such as an EpiPen or asthma inhaler. You may need to give the medication to visit floor staff to hold.
- If you receive medication through a device that is attached to your body — such as an insulin pump — you will be allowed to keep the device with you, but you may face resistance from the staff. It might make sense to bring a letter from a medical provider.

### ***What if I want to bring children?***

Children are permitted if their parent or guardian is accompanying them. If the parent or guardian is not accompanying the child, most states require that a signed document, often notarized, by the child's parent or guardian

be presented. The document must be an original. Children without this signed document are often turned away. You may want to bring any identification you have for the children with you, just to be cautious. You may not leave children unaccompanied in the waiting room or parking lot.

Facilities ask that children follow some basic behavioral rules that vary from facility to facility. Some facilities may have play areas for small children.

With regards to baby needs, every facility has its own policies on what you can bring onto the visiting floor. Typically you are permitted to bring in some variation of one blanket, one clear plastic baby bottle and formula that you mix in front of the guards, and one diaper. However, be sure to check the specific policy of the facility you are visiting. Your children may be subjected to searches. You have the right to be with your children at all times during these searches.

### ***Will I get searched?***

Yes. Prior to being permitted to visit someone in a prison, the officers at the entrance of the facility will subject you to various kinds of searches. These searches might include: strip-search, pat search, wand search, metal detector, being sniffed by dogs, or ion scanning.

You have a right to refuse a search. However, if you refuse a search, the facility can — and probably will — deny your visit. Generally, refusing a search will only impact your

ability to visit that day and not future visits.

### ***What will the search consist of?***

There are a variety of types of searches you may be subjected to. You may be subjected to random ion scanning with a hand frisker or other non-intrusive tests for detection of drugs and explosives. You will almost always have to walk through a metal detector. There will typically be a police dog present during your search. Officers will also search through your personal belongings.

You may also be searched by an officer of the same sex in a private area. In most states, there is no clear guidance to officers on what constitutes a same-sex search of a transgender individual. However, it is very likely that you will be searched by an officer of the sex you were assigned at birth or the sex that appears on your ID. During this kind of search, the officer may lift clothing or other garments.

If you do not pass the search, there can be a host of negative consequences: your visit will be denied, future visits can be denied, and the prison staff may even call the police to arrest you if illegal contraband is found in your possession.

### ***Will I be strip-searched?***

A strip-search in a private area may be authorized by a superintendent if an officer believes that all other search methods are not adequate. An officer is supposed to have reasonable cause for requesting a strip-search (i.e., the metal detector indicates you may have contraband or your hands test positive for drug residue). As with all legal

standards, there is no way to ensure that this “reasonable cause” standard is followed.

SRLP has found that TGNCI individuals may be more likely to be subjected to strip-searches because of the discrimination we face. As mentioned above, refusal to be strip-searched may result in being unable to visit, but should have no bearing on future visits. If you are worried about the effect turning down a strip-search will have, you can call the facility in advance and explain you are a first-time visitor and you have some questions about your rights regarding visits and searches.

Different states define the term “strip-search” differently. Most states define strip-search as removing each item of clothing for inspection by an officer until you are naked and then assisting in a search of your bodily cavities. This may include running your fingers around your gums or lifting external genitalia so that it can be inspected without being touched by the officer. In other states, you may be able to remain in your underwear and may not be subject to a body cavity search. Strip-searches should happen with two officers present in a private area; however, this does not always happen. Strip-searches can be quick or take a long time depending on the circumstances.

***What if I'd like to file a complaint in connection to a visit?***

Each agency should have a process for filing a complaint against an officer or other staff member during a visit. If possible, check in with the person you are visiting or attempting to visit to ensure they want this complaint filed as

well.

While unlikely, it is possible that you may find yourself in an escalating situation with a prison guard. If this happens, please try to stay calm and keep your movements slow and contained. If the situation isn't getting better, ask politely to speak to someone in charge. While the visit is important, it is also important to protect yourself. Ask if you are able to leave and leave as soon as you can. You can follow up with the facility by phone to ensure you are still allowed to visit at another date.

***New York Tip:***  
The recommended procedure if something happens during a visit is to first ask to speak with a security supervisor. Inform the supervisor that you would like to file a complaint against an officer. If you find that inadequate or if you are uncomfortable making that request, you can write to DOCCS following your visit. The more details you include the stronger your complaint is: date, time, place, names and badge numbers of people involved, if known, and any other documentation you may have regarding the complaint. You can read DOCCS' Family Handbook for more information.

## What If I Can't Visit?

If, after reading this guide, you realize it isn't safe or a good idea for you to visit — that is OK. There are many legitimate reasons not to visit — from concerns over immigration status to realizing you wouldn't be able to support the person you are there to support. It is better to know this now for both your well-being and for your loved ones.

And there are other ways to support our loved ones on the inside. Below is a list of some ideas:

- Keep being a pen pal
- Volunteer with a local group that supports people on the inside
- Create art for people on the inside
- Join a local pen pal group and, even if you can't be a pen pal, help with other tasks!
- Work to ensure that other organizations you are involved with make space for people who are incarcerated or newly returning home

## Conclusion

After reading this guide, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the number of procedural barriers that have been created to isolate incarcerated people from their community. However, we hope that the information provided can be used as a tool for developing creative and sustainable strategies to fight the systems of oppression that seek to separate us.

As strategies are implemented and stories are shared, SRLP wants to hear from you! We want to continue the dialogue that was created when we began this project. Please email us at [info@srlp.org](mailto:info@srlp.org) with your strategies for supporting incarcerated community members, stories about visiting facilities, and other thoughts you would like to share. We intend to issue future editions of this guide that are updated to reflect the experiences of more of our community members.

## Resources

- The Americans with Disabilities Act —  
[www.ada.gov/2010\\_regs.htm](http://www.ada.gov/2010_regs.htm)
- Black and Pink — [www.blackandpink.org](http://www.blackandpink.org)
- The Correctional Association of New York —  
[www.correctionalassociation.org](http://www.correctionalassociation.org)
- DOCCS Family and Friends Handbook —  
[www.doccs.ny.gov/FamilyGuide/FamilyHandbook.pdf](http://www.doccs.ny.gov/FamilyGuide/FamilyHandbook.pdf)
- Prison Talk Online Community — [www.prisontalk.com](http://www.prisontalk.com)
- SRLP's *It's War in Here* — [www.srlp.org/its-war-in-here](http://www.srlp.org/its-war-in-here)
- SRLP's *Self-Care on the Inside* —  
[www.srlp.org/self-care-on-the-inside-guide](http://www.srlp.org/self-care-on-the-inside-guide)

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Cover/Back Art  
Rachel Warner

Page 1 //  
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Page 19 //  
SRLP founder and Collective  
Member Dean Spade and SRLP member  
Calvin Burnap  
Photo by Gabriel Foster

Page 23 //  
CeCe McDonald holding a copy of  
SRLP's publication, *In Solidarity*  
Photo by Gabriel Foster

Page 29 //  
Sylvia Rivera holding Power to the  
People sign  
Original image by Diane Daives

Page 46 //  
tuesday smillie  
City Hall, 1973  
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11 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" X 12"

